

THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA

*Paris 23 juin 2015*

CHRISTIE'S







# THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA

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LE KOTA WILLIAM RUBIN

CHRISTIE'S

Power  
Rubin

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Pablo Picasso and William Rubin with *Guitar* at the artist's home, Notre-Dame-de-Vie, in Mougins, on February 15, 1971, the day Picasso gave his sculpture to The Museum of Modern Art.







William Rubin at his desk in his  
loft at 13<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, 1967

## WILLIAM RUBIN: A QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

By Susan Kloman

William Rubin (1927-2006) was one of the most important art world figures of the 20th century. His gravitas was felt by all who knew him, met him or came into his sphere. Few have surpassed his scope of influence in his role of Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art, a post he held for two decades from 1967 to 1988.

William Rubin, Bill to his friends, was a distinguished curator, scholar, critic, collector, art historian and teacher. His excellence shone in each facet.

Bill grew up in Riverdale in the Bronx section of New York City. A kind of phenom, he first met Victor d'Amico, then Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art while still in high school and did volunteer work on special projects. He went to Columbia University, where his studies were interrupted by a European tour as part of the armed forces in World War II. Eventually, he received a B.A. in Italian studies. He then spent a year at the University of Paris planning a career as a concert conductor, but returned to Columbia to pursue an advance degree in history. At Columbia, a course under the art historian Meyer Schapiro, caused Rubin to switch to art history. He then became a professor himself, an editor for Art International, and art collector. In the 1960's he lived part-time in Paris and kept an apartment there. Later, he spent time in the South of France at L'Oubradou, where he would invite scholars and friends, like Ernst Beyeler, to engage in research and enterprising discussions.

His own personal collection, built when he was a professor at Sarah Lawrence and Hunter Colleges, shows us a person who understood art intimately. Quality. Relevance. Prescience. Couldn't live without it. It had to physically line his walls as it did the walls of his vast mind.

*'I don't think I ever had a more direct, critical or inspiring teacher'*

—Ronald S. Lauder



Sur deux étages  
l'appartement d'un  
Américain ami des arts

William Rubin's Apt., Quai de Bourbon, Ile Saint-Louis, 1962.

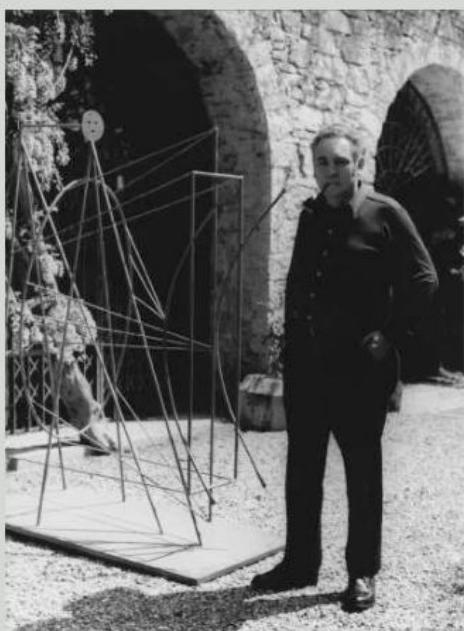


The dining room of William Rubin's loft, 1967.

Richard Oldenburg, Director Emeritus of the Museum of Modern Art, noted that possibly one of Alfred Barr's greatest accomplishments was in selecting Bill as his successor at MoMA. Most would agree that MoMA's collection does not have a single work which does not have a meaningful place there or in the annals of art history. Bill studied the collection so carefully to fill any gaps, or lacunae, as he phrased it. His famous first acquisition of Picasso's *Guitar* of 1914, is, of course, legendary. And so continued his career. Brancusi, Giacometti, Miró, Kline, Newman, Matisse, Mondrian, Stella, Still...

Art historian, Robert Rosenblum, noted one of Bill's most memorable traits as a curator and teacher 'with a lapidary precision that continued in the tradition of one of his great mentors, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., he pruned prose and history to their essentials'. Indeed, he could encapsulate the most complex ideas into economical turns of phrase. His exhibitions, equally, used very few words or convolutions. He insisted on placement and juxtaposition as the way to guide a viewer and let the works of art speak.

Before he passed away in 2006, Bill wrote a book about his time at MoMA, which was brought to fruition, fortunately, in 2011 by his wife, Phyllis Hattis Rubin—*A Curator's Quest: Building the Collection of Painting and Sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art, 1967-1988*. The book is a biography of the Museum's collection during his tenure and gives great insight into his myriad approaches to art.

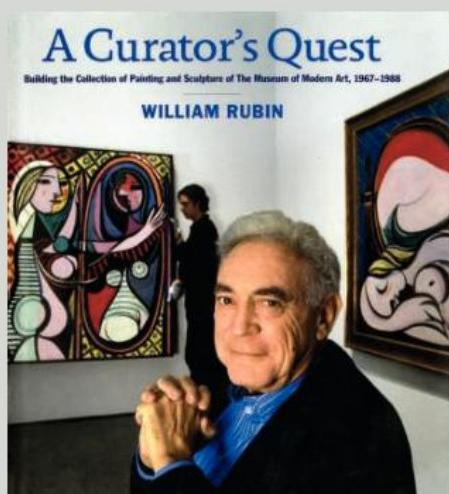


William Rubin with Picasso's 1962 sculpture, *Project for a Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire*, at the Artists home in Mougins, 1972.



William Rubin's loft on Broadway in 1967: Frank Stella with son, Michael, Barbara Rose, Larry Poons, Lucinda Childs, Rubin, Wilson Green and Barnett Newman



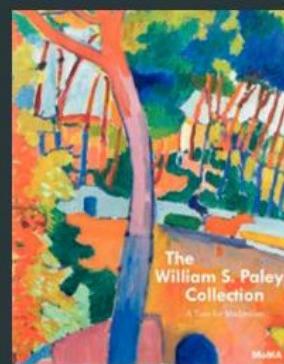
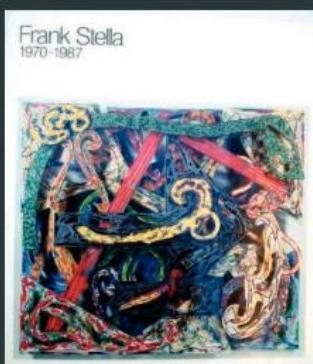
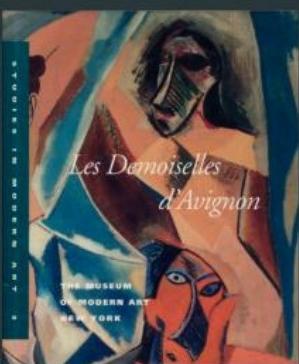
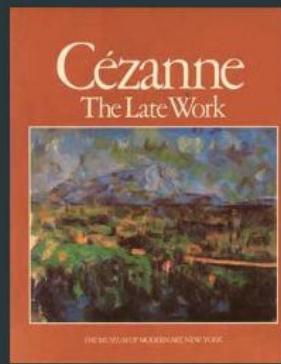
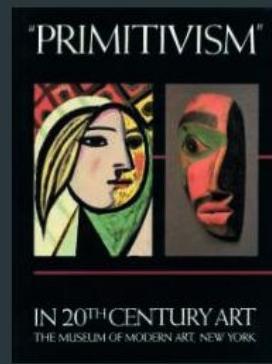
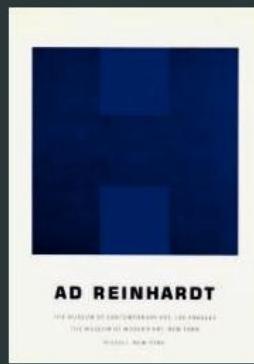
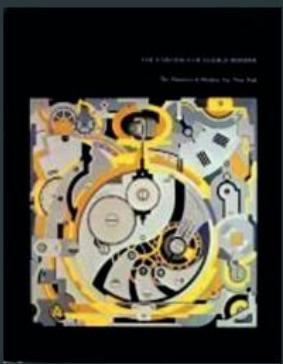
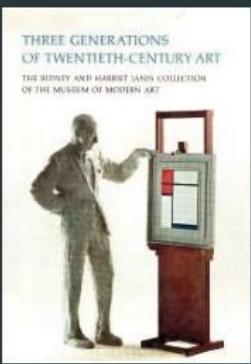
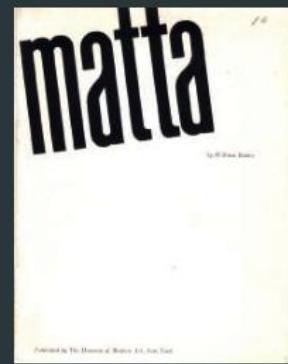
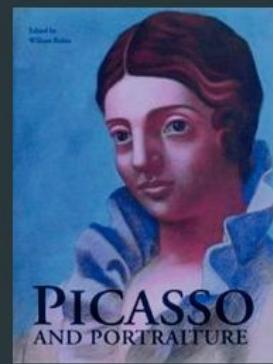
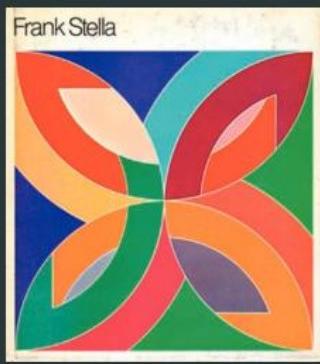
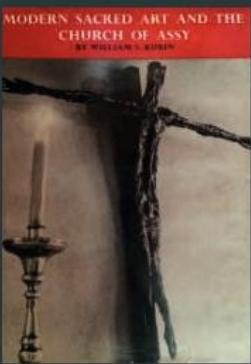
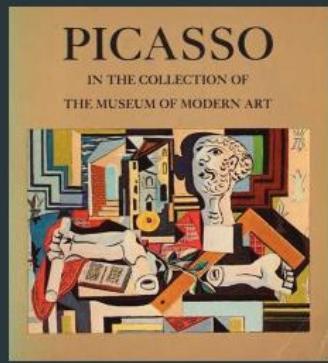
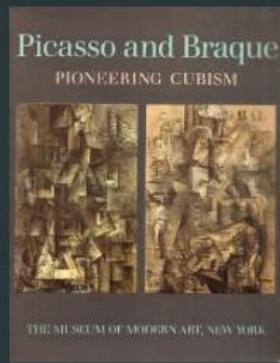
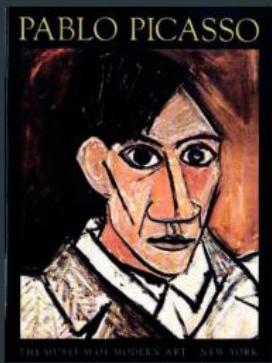
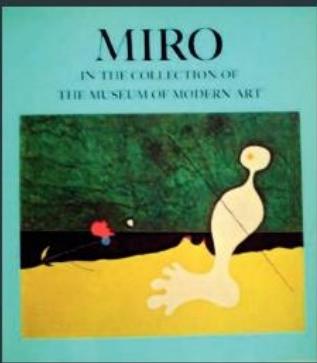
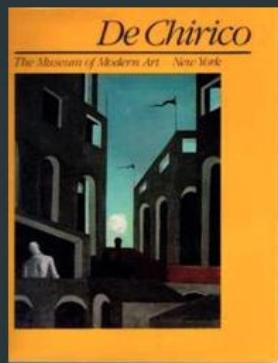
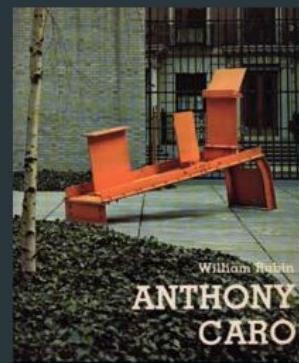
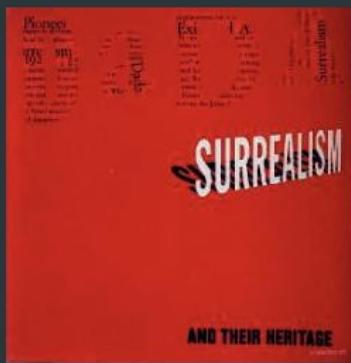
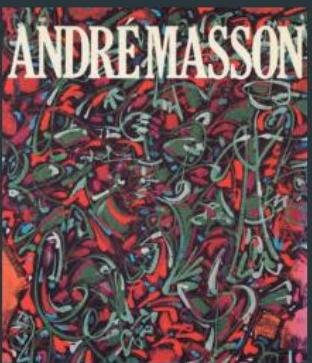


Top: William Rubin in 1977 installing Cézanne: *The Late Work* at the Museum of Modern Art.

Middle row, left: William and Phyllis Hattis with Picasso's painting *Maya in a Sailor Suit* (1938), at the artists home, 1985.

Middle row, right: The façade of the Museum of Modern Art, c. 1984.

Bottom: Installation view of William Rubin's 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *"Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.



William Rubin's Publications (see captions, page 72)



# THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA

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LE KOTA WILLIAM RUBIN









## THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA

Master Artist, Gabon

Wood, brass, copper, iron

19th century; base by Kichizô Inagaki

26 in. (66 cm.)

## PROVENANCE

Georges de Miré (1890-1965), Paris, before 1920

Drouot, *Collection G. de Miré, Sculptures anciennes d'Afrique et d'Amérique*, Paris, 16 December 1931, lot 57

Helena Rubinstein, Paris/New York, acquired from the above  
Parke Bernet Galleries, *The Helena Rubinstein Collection*, New York 1966, lot 192

David Lloyd Kreeger, The Kreeger Collection, Washington, D.C.,  
acquired from the above

William Rubin, New York, circa 1981

## PUBLISHED

Sweeney, J. J., *African Negro Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1935, n.379

Evans, W., "African Negro Art," Portfolio de 477 photographs of the objects in the exhibition at MoMA, 1935

Radin, P. and Sweeney, J. J., *African Folktales and Sculpture*, New York, 1952, n.144

Nathan-Garamond, J. (1913-2001), Air France, poster, circa 1960

Dorra, H., *The Kreeger Collection*, catalogue, H. K. Press, 1970, p. 164 et 165

Adams, H., *Art and Man*, National Gallery of Art educational periodical, 1970

Magazine Scholastic, "Black Literature Series," New York, 1971

Fagg, W., *African Sculpture*, Washington, D.C., International Exhibitions Foundation, 1970, p.73, n.71

Robbins, W., "How to approach the traditional African sculpture," Smithsonian Magazine, September 1972, p.49

Robbins, W., *African Art in Washington Collections*,

Washington D.C., Museum of African Art, 1973, p.41, n. 297

Makouta-Nboukou, J.P., "Black African Literature," Rockville, MD, 1973, cover illustration

Chaffin, A. & F., *L'Art Kota: Les figures de reliquaire*, Meudon, 1979, p.256, n.153

Rubin, W. (ed.), "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York,

The Museum of Modern Art (Harry N. Abrams), 1984

Rubin, W. (éd.), *Le Primitivisme dans l'art du 20e siècle. Les artistes modernes devant l'art tribal*, Paris, 1987, p.268, vol.I

Kerchache, J., Paudrat, J.-L. & Stephan, L., *L'art africain*, Paris, Mazenod, 1988, p.427, n.595

Slesin, S., *Over The Top: Helena Rubinstein, Extraordinary Style: Beauty, Art, Fashion, Design*, New York, Pointed Leaf Press,

2003, pp. 76 & 78

Klein, M., *Helena Rubinstein: Beauty is Power*, The Jewish Museum, 2014, p. 115

Cloth, F., *Kota: Digital Excavations in African Art*, 2015 (forthcoming), St. Louis, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2015

## EXHIBITED

Paris, Galerie Pigalle, *Exposition d'art africain et d'art océanien*, 28 February-1 April 1930

New York, The Museum of Modern Art, *African Negro Art*: 18 March-19 May 1935 (additional venues):

- Manchester, NH, Currier Museum of Art, 10 June-8 July 1935
- San Francisco, CA, San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), 23 July-2 September 1935
- Cleveland, OH, Cleveland Museum of Art, 28 September-27 October 1935

Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, *African Sculpture*: 29 January-1 March 1970 (additional venues):

- Kansas City, MO, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, 21 March-26 April 1970
- Brooklyn, NY, The Brooklyn Museum, 26 May-21 June 1970

Washington, D.C., *African Art in Washington Collections*, Museum of African Art, 1972

New York, The Museum of Modern Art, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern*: 27 September-15 January 1985 (additional venues):

- The Detroit Institute of Arts, 26 February-19 May 1985
- Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, 23 June-1 September 1985

New York, *Helena Rubinstein: Beauty is Power*, The Jewish Museum, 31 October 2014-22 March 2015

St. Louis, *Kota: Digital Excavations in African Art*, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 16 October 2015-19 March 2016 (Promised Loan)









William Rubin, 1980



The William Rubin Kota on view in "Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, alongside Picasso's *Nude with Raised Arms* (1907).

## THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA: An Aristocratic Family Tree LE KOTA WILLIAM RUBIN: Une Généalogie Aristocratique

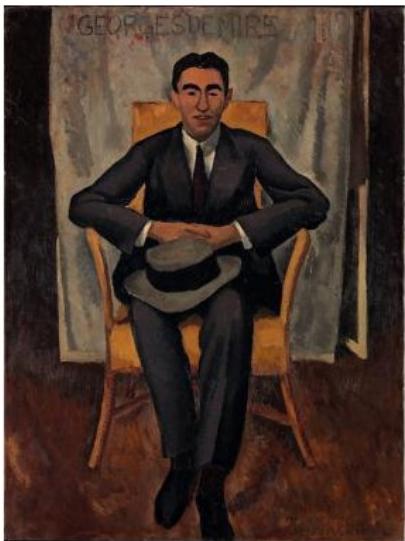
By Pierre Amrouche

Nowadays, so fond of pedigrees, the Rubin Kota seems to be the archetypical object with a history, through both its succession of famous and familiar owners and the exceptional spaces in which it has been exhibited. The first fortunate owner was Georges de Miré (1890-1965), followed by Helena Rubinstein (1870-1965) and David Lloyd Kreeger (1909-1990), and lastly William Rubin (1927-2006), all four of whom are exceptional collectors who left their marks through their collections and deeds. Likewise, three historic exhibitions have displayed the Kota reliquary: the African and Oceanian art exhibition at the Galerie Pigalle in 1930, *African Negro Art* in New York in 1935, and the outstanding 1984 New York exhibition—*Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, curated by William Rubin. By going further into the details that collectors appreciate and bestow upon objects such as this an additional quality, we can see that the Kota was photographed in New York 1935 by Walker Evans following the *African Negro Art* exhibition, and that its base is by none other than Inagaki, the prince of base makers!

As is the case for many historical masterpieces, the earliest origins of this fantastic object remain a mystery, but its perfection could almost have us believe that it came from heaven, sent by some god of the arts, rather than the fruit of human efforts! Indeed, while it is easy to trace its family tree from 1930 to the present day, knowing not only the identity of those who have had the honour to own it for a while—such pieces are only ever our guests—but also its market value on many occasions during

A notre époque, si férue de pédigrées, le kota Rubin apparaît comme l'archétype de l'objet historisé, de par ses propriétaires successifs connus et fameux, et de par les lieux tous autant d'exception où il fut exposé. Le premier heureux possesseur fut Georges de Miré (1890-1965), suivi par Helena Rubinstein (1870-1965), puis par David Lloyd Kreeger (1909-1990), et enfin par William Rubin (1927-2006), tous quatre collectionneurs d'exception ayant marqué leur temps par leurs choix et par leurs actions. De même, trois expositions historiques ont montré le reliquaire kota : l'exposition d'art africain et océanien de la Galerie Pigalle en 1930, *African Negro Art* à New York en 1935, et enfin l'exceptionnelle exposition de New York 1984 - *Le Primitivisme dans l'art du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle*, organisée par William Rubin. En allant plus loin dans les détails qui importent aux collectionneurs et apportent à un objet comme celui-ci un supplément de qualité, notons que le kota a été photographié en 35 à New York par Walker Evans après l'exposition *African Negro Art*, et qu'il est soclé par Inagaki le prince des socleurs !

Comme c'est le cas pour beaucoup de chefs-d'œuvre historiques, l'origine première de ce magnifique objet reste un mystère, sa perfection pourrait presque nous faire croire qu'il est descendu du ciel, envoyé par quelque dieu des arts, qu'il n'est pas d'essence humaine ! En effet, si nous suivons sans problème sa généalogie de 1930 à nos jours, connaissant non seulement l'identité de ceux qui eurent l'honneur de le posséder quelques temps - nous ne sommes que locataires de ces pièces - mais encore



Far left: Roger de la Fresnaye, *Portrait of Georges de Miré*, 1910.

Left: Helena Rubinstein with Miró's *Femmes et Oiseaux dans la nuit* (1944) and Brancusi's *La négresse Blanche* (1928).

Below: David and Carmen Kreeger with Joan and Pilar Miró, c. 1973.

Right: Helena Rubinstein's apartment on Paris's Left Bank.

Far right: The Museum of Modern Art's original home on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, c. 1936.

public sales, for example, there is nothing to tell us where and from whom the Kota was purchased before Georges de Miré, its first official owner. No more than we know from whom Miré bought his other famous Gabonese pieces! The one thing that we can profess to know is that Miré doubtless acquired the Kota after 1923, the date of the Pavilion Marsan to which he loaned some pieces, but not a Kota reliquary. However, the object is clearly present on page 16 of issue 186 of the catalogue, loaned in his name, for the 1930 Galerie Pigalle exhibition that displayed so many important objects, with Miré alone loaning 39 of 425. An artist and photographer, cousin of the painter Roger de la Fresnaye who painted him in several portraits, one of which is in the Metropolitan, he was doubtless one of the collectors of this time with the most narrow taste, focusing on pieces of the highest quality and produced—like his Kota—very differently from more accessible aestheticized pieces. De Miré liked frontal art that summarized a style or a culture, such as Fang and Kota art, for example, from the two major artistic heritages in Equatorial Africa.

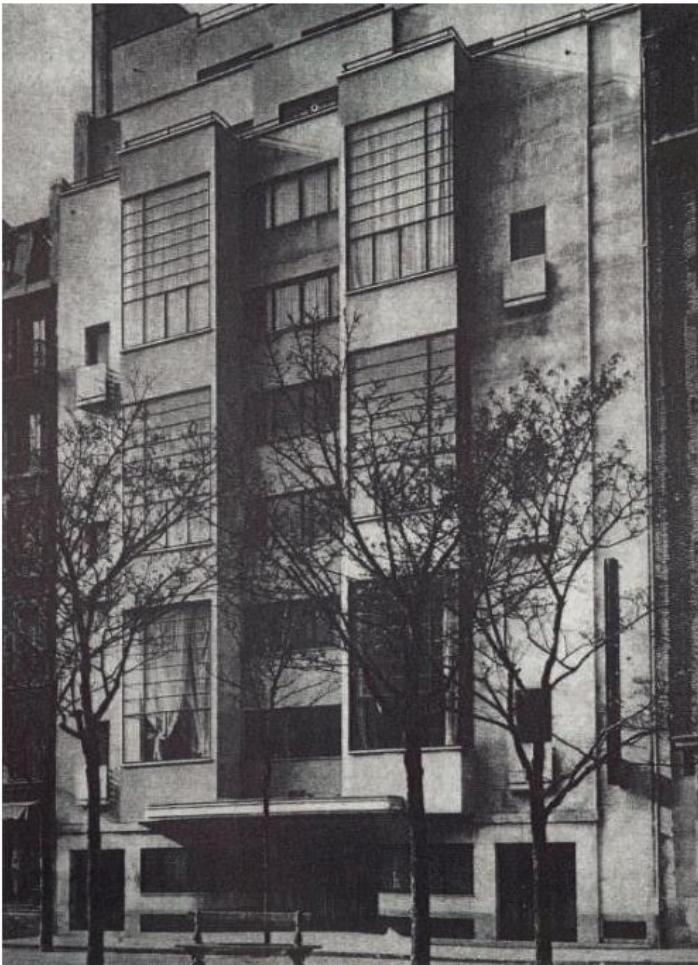
Following a series of poor business moves, he was obliged to sell his collection of 112 pieces of African art in Paris in 1931, through the auctioneer Alphonse Bellier, assisted by Charles Ratton and Louis Carré in the capacity of experts. The catalogue was luxurious for the time and included a preface by Georges-Henri Rivière, Deputy Director of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. His introduction stated that "at the Hôtel Drouot we have never seen so much beauty worthy of such science, in the field of primitive art". While it was not illustrated in the catalogue, Lot 57 caught the astute eye of Helena Rubenstein, who purchased the piece.

Helena Rubenstein needs no introduction, nor does her astounding success, especially for a woman of her time: it is the radiant affirmation of her amazing intuition in any field to which she set her mind. As a businesswoman and collector, her approach to



connaissant aussi sa valeur vénale à maintes reprises, lors des ventes publiques où il fut cédé par exemple, en revanche antérieurement à Georges de Miré, son premier propriétaire identifié officiel, rien ne nous indique à ce jour où et à qui ce Kota fut acheté. Pas plus que nous ne savons à qui de Miré acheta ses autres pièces gabonaises fameuses ! La seule chose que nous supposons, c'est que de Miré en fit sans doute l'acquisition après 1923, date de l'exposition du Pavillon de Marsan, où il prêta des objets, mais pas de figure de reliquaire kota. En revanche, l'objet est bien présent sous le numéro 186 page 16 du catalogue, prêté à son nom, à l'exposition de la Galerie Pigalle en 1930 où furent réunis tant d'objets majeurs, de Miré en prêtant pour sa part 39 sur 425. Artiste et photographe, cousin du peintre Roger de la Fresnaye, qui fit plusieurs portraits de lui dont l'un est au Metropolitan, il fut sans doute un des collectionneurs de l'époque ayant le goût le plus ferme, orienté sur des pièces de toute première qualité et construites - comme son kota - très loin des pièces esthétisantes d'approche facile. De Miré aimait l'art frontal qui synthétise un style, une culture : l'art fang et l'art kota, par exemple, les deux grands foyers artistiques de l'Afrique Equatoriale.

Ayant fait de mauvaises affaires, il se trouva contraint de vendre sa collection de 112 objets d'art africain en 1931 à Paris par le commissaire-priseur Alphonse Bellier assisté de Charles Ratton et de Louis Carré comme experts. Le catalogue, luxueux pour



culture was unique. Helped by the learned advice of the sculptor Jacob Epstein, an encyclopaedic collector, Charles Ratton, the 20th century's most competent antique dealer and expert, and F.H Lem who compiled the collection of Sudanese sculptures, Helena Rubenstein amassed a unique collection of primitive art. Reading the sale catalogue for the 261 objects auctioned at Parke-Bernet in New York in 1966, following her death, makes one's head spin. The Kota is featured on p. 160 and 161.

During this memorable sale, the Kota was purchased by a couple of art lovers from Washington, the Kreegers, who also made other quality purchases: lots 190 and 191, two Gabonese masks. David Lloyd Kreeger, the head of the American government civil service insurance company Geico, began collecting quite late in life, at the age of 43. But he made up for lost time with his wife Carmen, amassing an art collection of some 300 pieces. Impressionist and modern paintings, sculptures and tribal art were soon housed together in an impressive building erected by the architects Philip Johnson and Richard Foster in Washington: the Kreeger Museum. David Lloyd Kreeger stated: "I have never bought art as an investment, I buy it out of passion and got lucky". His reputation as an international collector and philanthropist was nourished in a variety of fields, and especially in music: in 1980 he founded the Washington Opera of which he was the first chairman. Curiously, the Kreegers chose not to



l'époque, est préfacé par Georges-Henri Rivière, Sous-Directeur du musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro ; dans son introduction il affirme : «... on aura rarement vu à l'Hôtel Drouot, dans le domaine de l'art primitif, autant de beauté digne de tant de science. ». Bien que n'étant pas reproduit au catalogue l'objet, n°57, n'échappa pas à l'œil avisé d'Helena Rubinstein qui en fit l'acquisition.

Il est inutile de présenter la grande Helena Rubinstein, sa réussite exceptionnelle, surtout pour une femme à cette époque : elle est l'affirmation brillante de son intuition géniale dans tous les domaines sur lesquels elle a porté son regard. Comme femme d'affaire et comme collectionneuse, son approche de la culture est unique. Aidée des conseils avisés du sculpteur Jacob Epstein, collectionneur encyclopédique, de Charles Ratton, à la fois l'expert et l'antiquaire le plus compétent du 20e siècle et grand collectionneur, et de F.H.Lem qui, lui, constitua l'ensemble des sculptures soudanaises, Helena Rubinstein a réuni une collection d'art primitif hors norme. La lecture du catalogue de la vente de 1966 réunissant 261 objets chez Parke-Bernet à New York, après son décès, donne le vertige. Le Kota y figure p.160 et 161.

Lors de cette vente mémorable, le Kota fut acheté par un couple d'amateurs d'art de Washington, les Kreeger, qui y firent aussi d'autres achats de qualité, les lots 190 et 191, deux masques du Gabon. David Lloyd Kreeger, grand patron de la compagnie d'as-



The William Rubin Kota held pride of place on  
Helena Rubinstein's mantel.

keep the Rubinstein Kota, even though it was incontestably the jewel in their tribal collection; they swapped it for a painting with the famous art dealer, Richard Feigen. Proof, if any was needed, that their acquisitions were made according to their hearts.

With William Rubin, who acquired it from Richard Feigen around 1980, the Rubenstein Kota changed its name, becoming the Rubin Kota and completing its 20th century odyssey: and what a denouement! William Rubin was not only the great director of the New York MoMA, where he operated with his intransigent and visionary haughtiness, he was also a leading collector of tribal art and paintings and the curator of the richest and most brilliant exhibition of '*Primitivism*' in 20th Century Art in New York in 1984. All of those lucky enough to visit the exhibition retain a dazzling memory of this great mass, where all forms of 20th century art entered into communion with tribal art at long

The Kreeger Museum, designed in 1963 by Philip Johnson with Richard Foster.

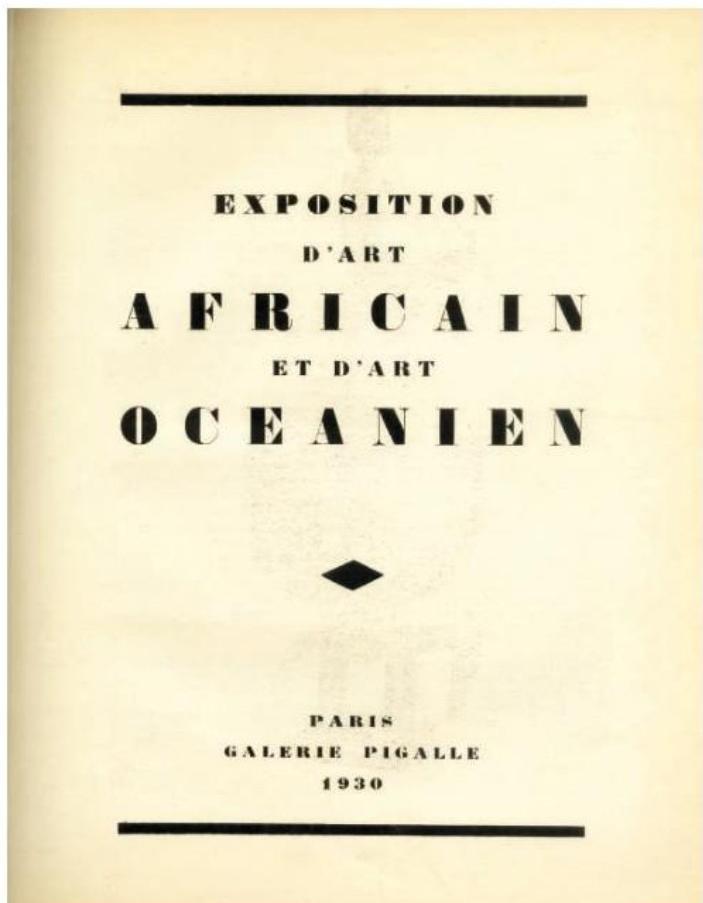


surance des fonctionnaires du gouvernement américain Geico, était venu assez tard à la collection, à l'âge de 43 ans. Mais il rattrapa le temps perdu et fit avec son épouse Carmen une collection d'art de plus de 300 pièces, tableaux impressionnistes et modernes, sculptures et art tribal qui furent bientôt réunis dans un superbe bâtiment construit par les architectes Philip Johnson et Richard Foster à Washington, le Kreeger Museum. David Lloyd Kreeger a déclaré : « Je n'ai jamais acheté d'art pour investir, j'ai acheté par passion et j'ai eu de la chance. ». Sa réputation de collectionneur était internationale et sa philanthropie s'est exercée dans de nombreux domaines, tout particulièrement dans la musique ; il a créé en 1980 le Washington Opera dont il fut le premier président ; curieusement les Kreeger ne conservèrent pas le Kota Rubinstein qui était pourtant incontestablement le fleuron de leur ensemble tribal, ils l'échangèrent contre un tableau avec le fameux marchand d'art Richard Feigen. Une preuve, s'il en fallait, que leurs achats reposaient sur des coups de cœur.

Avec William Rubin, qui l'obtient de Richard Feigen vers 1980, le Kota Rubinstein change de patronyme devenant le Kota Rubin. Il achève ainsi son odyssée du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et par quelle apothéose ! William Rubin fut non seulement le grand directeur du MoMA de New York sur lequel il exerça son magister intransigeant et visionnaire, il fut encore un collectionneur de peinture et d'art tribal de tout premier plan et le maître d'œuvre de la plus riche et brillante exposition *Le Primitivisme dans l'art du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle*, à New York en 1984. Tous ceux qui eurent le bonheur d'y assister ont gardé un souvenir ébloui de cette grande messe, où l'art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle sous toutes ses formes communiait avec l'art tribal



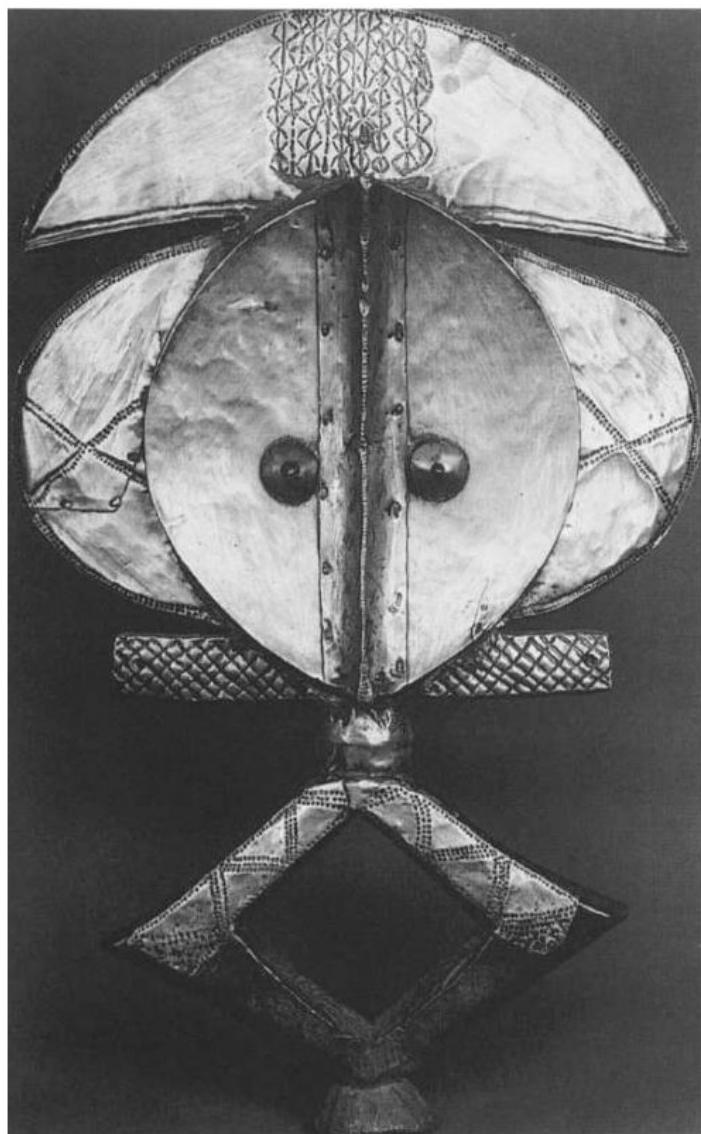
Carmen Kreeger (center) and the William Rubin Kota (far right) at the Kreegers' home in 1969.



Exhibition catalogue, Galerie Pigalle, 1930

last released from ethnographic constraints. It was only fair that this event should be held in New York, a city on the cutting edge where, in 1914, Alfred Stieglitz and Marius de Zayas paved the way, with modern art, for savage artists.

If Rubin did not invent the concept of Primitivism, he was without doubt the expert with the most extensive and clearest understanding of the subject, going much further than Robert Goldwater whose 1938 work *Primitivism in Modern Painting* laid the foundations. Certainly, his interest in this fundamental subject for 20th century art was born of his first encounters with Picasso and his work. These encounters irrevocably changed the course of his life, and opened up the vast field of tribal art so closely linked to the creative instincts of modern artists, however unwittingly, and that of Picasso in particular. Who can look at *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* without seeing tribal art? Can it be said that the faces of the five subjects are looking for their roots? Even without further examples, they support the primitivist theory of which William Rubin was the incontestable master. The singularity of William Rubin as a collector of tribal art lies in his in-depth research of the objects, their origins, meanings, influences, and convergences. By doing so, his approach transcends simple, but respectable, aesthetic



Walker Evans' photograph of the William Rubin Kota, taken for the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition, African Negro Art.

and celebratory considerations. An attitude he most likely shared with the Kota's previous owners.

By becoming the William Rubin Kota, this piece has not only acquired a prestigious name, but also its own existence and philosophy. It can hold its head high among the great artists of the last century, from Matisse to Picasso and Brancusi. Born of the tropical night, it has been elevated to a masterpiece of international art.

Not content with this aristocratic pedigree, made up of the four best collectors of their times, the Rubin Kota also showed its worth at three prestigious exhibitions: Exposition d'Art Africain et d'Art Océanie, Galerie Pigalle, in 1930 in Paris, African Negro Art in New York in 1935, and lastly the sumptuous '*Primitivism in 20th Century Art*', in New York in 1984.



Exhibition of De Miré Collection, 1931 at Hotel Drouot, Paris.

enfin sorti du carcan ethnographique ; ce n'était que justice que cet événement ait lieu à New York, ville phare des avant-gardes où déjà en 1914 Alfred Stieglitz et Marius de Zayas avaient donné leur place, avec l'art moderne, aux artistes sauvages.

Si Rubin ne fut pas l'inventeur du Primitivisme comme concept, il en fut certainement l'exégète au plus haut niveau de connaissance et de perspicacité, allant beaucoup plus loin que Robert Goldwater dont l'ouvrage de 1938 *Primitivism in Modern Painting* ouvrait la voie sans en achever le parcours. Sans doute, son intérêt pour ce sujet fondamental de l'histoire de l'art du 20e siècle fut initié dès ses premières rencontres avec Picasso et son œuvre. Ces rencontres qui orientèrent définitivement sa vie lui ouvrirent en même temps le vaste champ de l'art tribal si étroitement lié à toute la créativité des artistes modernes, volens nolens, et tout particulièrement à Picasso. Qui n'a pas vu *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* n'a jamais vu d'objet nègre, pourrait-on dire tant les visages des cinq personnages suffiraient à assoir une recherche en paternité. Rien que par eux-mêmes, ils étaient la théorie primitiviste dont William Rubin fut le maître incontestable. La singularité de William Rubin comme collectionneur d'art tribal réside dans sa recherche approfondie sur les objets, les sources, les significations, les influences voire les

confluences. En cela, son approche va bien au-delà des simples, mais respectables, considérations esthétiques et jubilatoires. Ce qui, sauf erreur, fut l'attitude des possesseurs du Kota avant lui.

En devenant le Kota Rubin, cet objet a acquis non seulement un nom prestigieux, mais aussi une pensée et une existence propre, il est capable de se tenir droit devant les grands artistes du siècle dernier, de Matisse à Picasso et à Brancusi. Enfanté par la nuit tropicale, il a été érigé au rang de chef-d'œuvre de l'art mondial.

Non content d'avoir cette généalogie aristocratique, puisqu'elle se compose des quatre meilleurs collectionneurs de son temps, le Kota Rubin s'est épanoui lors de trois prestigieuses expositions : *Exposition d'Art Africain et d'Art Océanie*, Galerie Pigalle, en 1930 à Paris, *African Negro Art* à New York en 1935, et enfin à la somptueuse *Le Primitivisme dans l'Art du 20<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, à New York en 1984.



Far left: Helena Rubinstein  
Left: Man Ray, *Bangwa Queen with model*, c. 1935

## GALERIE PIGALLE

The Galerie Pigalle exhibition heralded the future and near supremacy of Charles Ratton over his rival in primitive art, Paul Guillaume, whose interest in savage art was waning. Assisted by Tristan Tzara and Pierre Loeb, Ratton selected a collection of 425 objects, 288 of which were from Africa (Paudrat, 1987, p.163). Many of them are still considered to be masterpieces, such as the Derain Pahouin, the Ascher Pahouin head, Madam Hein's Habbé, and many others besides, not listed in the catalogue, like the Kota which then belonged to Georges de Miré. The list of lenders is impressive, numbering some 45 including the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. The introduction of the catalogue is indicative of changing opinions of primitive arts. It announces the expansion of the tribal art corpus to regions that are little-known by collectors, such as the Cameroon, as well as archaeological discoveries, brightening the future of research into the history of ancient African cultures. Before, some claimed that there was nothing of interest beneath the surface of Black Africa's soil but we now know this to be false, and have plenty of proof. Africa has been part of history for millennia!

## AFRICAN NEGRO ART

The real presentation of Kota to the art world was during *African Negro Art*, a tangible sign of changing perspectives of collectors and those looking to preserve the culture: during this prestigious exhibition, it was finally listed in the catalogue, joining those happy few prestigious pieces photographed by Walker Evans for his Portfolio! This iconic Portfolio, studied with panache my Virginia-Lee Webb in her book *Perfect Documents, Walker Evans And African Art, 1935*, published in 2000 in New York for the eponymous exhibition at the MET. During the 1935 exhibition, the first of its kind in a major modern art museum, the American public was finally shown African art as art, without feathers or

drums, nor any pejorative folklore, as was the explicit wish of Alfred Barr (1902-1981), the director of the New York Museum of Modern Art, reported by Virginia-Lee Webb in her aforementioned book. Barr recruited Sweeney and Goldwater, with Charles Ratton's approval, to bring together the 600 pieces for the exhibition obtained from around Europe and the USA. The exhibition, in a smaller format, travelled to various American cities, thereby fulfilling its educational vocation. The Kota was part of this collection (Webb, 2000, p.25). *African Negro Art* was also possible thanks to Charles Ratton's dedication to the exhibition, as the main lender providing the major pieces from his extensive collection. Paul Guillaume died in 1934 from peritonitis, and his wife, Domenica Guillaume, provided 34 pieces known collectively as "The Paul Guillaume Collection" (Paudrat, 1987, p.162, 164), a final homage to Guillaume's importance in this field before the arrival of Ratton.

## PRIMITIVISM IN 20th CENTURY ART

William Rubin's exhibition brought the cycle of major tribal art exhibitions in the 20th century to a close, providing numerous examples supporting his theory of primitivism. This fantastic, long exhibition in 1984 is still alive today thanks to its impressive catalogue that forms a true bible of the field. The Kota is featured on page 268 of the French edition in the article entitled "Picasso", penned by Rubin himself. The number of prestigious contributors (19) and the pieces and artists studied, would lead us to believe that the subject has nothing more to reveal. However, it is possible that with access to never before seen archives, we may still learn new insights about the influence of primitive artists on contemporary art in the past or future. Rubin's path never ends.

## GALERIE PIGALLE

L'exposition de la galerie Pigalle annonce la future et proche suprématie de Charles Ratton sur son rival dans le domaine des arts primitifs, Paul Guillaume, dont l'intérêt pour les arts sauvages décline. Assisté de Tristan Tzara et Pierre Loeb, Ratton sélectionnera un ensemble de 425 objets, dont 288 africains (Paudrat, 1987, p.163), parmi ceux-ci un grand nombre figure toujours au rang des grands chefs-d'œuvre de l'art, le Pahouin Derain, la tête Pahouine d'Ascher, le Habbé de Madame Hein ; et bien d'autres encore, non reproduits au catalogue, comme le Kota alors propriété de Georges de Miré. La liste des prêteurs est impressionnante, ils sont 45, dont le Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. L'introduction au catalogue est révélatrice des changements d'opinion sur les arts primitifs. Elle annonce l'ouverture du corpus de l'art tribal à des régions peu connues des collectionneurs, comme le Cameroun, et des découvertes archéologiques aussi, prévoyant un grand avenir à la recherche de l'histoire des civilisations africaines anciennes. Auparavant, certains affirmaient que le sous-sol de l'Afrique Noire était vide, notre époque sait qu'il n'en est rien, preuves à l'appui. L'Afrique est entrée dans l'histoire depuis des millénaires !

## AFRICAN NEGRO ART

La véritable présentation au monde de l'Art Nègre du Kota sera *African Negro Art*. Et, signe tangible du changement de regard des collectionneurs et conservateurs : lors de cette prestigieuse exposition, il est enfin reproduit au catalogue, faisant partie, comble des honneurs, des happy few photographiés par Walker Evans pour son Portfolio ! Ce mythique Portfolio, étudié avec brio par Virginia-Lee Webb, dans son ouvrage *Perfect Documents, Walker Evans And African Art, 1935*, publié en 2000 à New York pour l'exposition homonyme au MET. Lors de cette exposition de 1935, la première en son genre dans un grand musée d'art moderne, on montrait enfin au public américain l'art africain comme de l'art - sans plumes, sans tamtam - sans aucun folklore péjoratif, et cela par la volonté expresse d'Alfred Barr (1902-1981) le directeur du Museum of Modern Art de New York, ce que souligne Virginia-Lee Webb dans son ouvrage cité plus haut. Barr chargea Sweeney et Goldwater avec le concours de Charles Ratton de réunir les six cent trois objets de l'exposition provenant des USA et de l'Europe. L'exposition, sur un mode réduit, fut présentée dans différentes villes américaines, son but éducatif était ainsi affirmé. Le Kota fera partie de cette sélection (Webb, 2000, p.25). *African Negro Art* fut aussi la consécration incontestée de Charles Ratton qui en sera le premier prêteur avec les pièces majeures de son importante

collection ; Paul Guillaume décédé en 1934 d'une péritonite, ce fut son épouse Domenica Guillaume qui envoya 34 objets libellés « The Paul Guillaume Collection » (Paudrat, 1987, p.162, 164) une ultime façon de rappeler la place prépondérante que Guillaume tenait dans ce domaine avant l'arrivée de Ratton.

## LE PRIMITIVISME DANS L'ART DU XX<sup>E</sup> SIECLE

L'exposition organisée par William Rubin terminera le cycle des grandes expositions d'art tribal du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, il y exposera preuves à l'appui - les illustrations sont innombrables - le bienfondé de sa théorie primitiviste. Cette magnifique exposition fleuve de 1984 survit de nos jours à travers son imposant catalogue véritable bible sur le sujet. Le Kota y est reproduit page 268 de l'édition française dans l'article intitulé « Picasso », rédigé par Rubin lui-même. Le nombre de contributeurs prestigieux, 19, et les articles et artistes étudiés, font penser que le sujet est épuisé. Cependant, il est possible que l'ouverture d'archives inconnues nous apporte encore aujourd'hui et demain d'autres informations sur l'influence des artistes primitifs sur l'art contemporain passé ou futur. La voie tracée par Rubin est infinie.



Left: An advertisement for the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition, African Negro Art

Below: The façade of the Museum of Modern Art, c. 1984



# FROM SHADOW TO LIGHT—A BRIDGE BETWEEN PARIS AND NEW YORK

Kichizô Inagaki, Helena Rubinstein

## DE L'OMBRE À LA LUMIÈRE, UN PONT ENTRE PARIS ET NEW YORK

Kichizô Inagaki, Helena Rubinstein

By Charles-Wesley Hourdé

From Paul Guillaume to Charles Ratton, from Matisse to Picasso via André Breton and Helena Rubinstein, the leading figures on the avant-garde art scene at the start of the last century were surrounded by contemporary artwork and African sculptures. Following the outbreak of the First World War, the movement soon spread from its roots in Europe to America, where the warm reception it received in New York boosted its influence on both continents. Intellectual and artistic exchanges created a bridge across the Atlantic.

The name of Japanese base-maker Kichizô Inagaki is closely linked to the golden age of African art in Europe, a halcyon period during which pioneers of modern art rubbed shoulders with promoters of so-called "Negro" art. Accompanying primitive works on their transatlantic crossings, the Japanese cabinet-maker's bases had a ringside seat at some of the most pivotal events of the 20th century, in both Paris and New York.

Helena Rubinstein—"the Empress of cosmetics" as Cocteau liked to call her—moved to Paris in 1912 and soon fell in with the French capital's intellectual elite including writers, artists and scientists. Having been introduced to African art by Jacob Epstein in London in 1908, she had already acquired works on his advice [1] and sometimes bid on his behalf at large auctions in Paris [2]. Her interest in African art and involvement in avant-garde circles, with both artists and antique dealers, allowed her to build up a remarkable collection.

Although no direct connection between Helena Rubinstein and Inagaki has so far been established, a link is evident from an examination of the works from her collection sold in 1966. The sale catalogue did not state the origin of the bases, and some were not shown in the pictures, while many objects were

De Paul Guillaume à Charles Ratton, de Matisse à Picasso en passant par André Breton et Helena Rubinstein, les personnalités de la scène artistique d'avant-garde du début du siècle dernier évoluaient dans une sphère tapissée d'œuvres contemporaines et de sculptures africaines. Suite au déclenchement de la première guerre mondiale, ce mouvement né en Europe ne tarda pas à s'étendre à l'Amérique. Sa bonne réception par les newyorkais amplifia sa résonnance sur les deux continents. Echanges intellectuels et artistiques, un pont était jeté au-dessus de l'Atlantique.

Le nom du socleur japonais Kichizô Inagaki est étroitement associé à l'âge d'or de l'art africain en Europe, époque bénite durant laquelle les précurseurs de l'art moderne côtoyaient les défenseurs de l'art dit « nègre ». Accompagnant les œuvres primitives lors de leurs voyages transatlantiques, les socles de l'ébéniste japonais se retrouvaient aux premières loges des évènements artistiques les plus marquants du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, tant à Paris qu'à New York.

Helena Rubinstein, « l'impératrice de la cosmétique » - comme aimait l'appeler Cocteau - s'installa à Paris en 1912 et fréquenta rapidement l'intelligentsia de la capitale : écrivains, artistes, scientifiques... Initiée à l'art africain dès 1908 par Jacob Epstein à Londres, elle avait déjà fait l'acquisition d'œuvres sur ses conseils [1] et enchérissait parfois pour son compte lors des grandes ventes publiques parisviennes [2]. Son goût pour l'art africain et son évolution dans une sphère avant-gardiste, fréquentant tant les artistes que les antiquaires, lui permit de constituer une collection remarquable.

Bien qu'aucun lien direct entre Helena Rubinstein et Inagaki n'ait encore pu être prouvé, l'examen des œuvres de sa collection



Kichizō Inagaki

not even published. However, objects from the Rubinstein collection which have recently resurfaced are almost all mounted on ceruse-finished bases stamped Yoshio, the name Inagaki used for his work [3]—with the exception of pieces which appear never to have had a base or which have lost their base. An extraordinary example is the Kota reliquary from the former Rubin collection presented here, along with a superb Bamana statue (Parke-Bernet, New York, 21 and 29 April, *The Helena Rubinstein Collection: African and Oceanic Art*, lot 57 and Klein, 2014, p.96) and a powerful Senufo *kpélié* headdress (Parke-Bernet, op.cit., lot 73 and Christie's, Paris, 15 June 2002, lot 268SR), to name but a few.

When Helena Rubinstein arrived in Paris, Inagaki was still working for the sculptor Rodin, as well as art dealers. As mentioned above, we do not know whether, like the collector Josef Mueller, Helena Rubinstein personally had her bases produced by the Japanese cabinetmaker or whether the works were already mounted when she acquired them. Unfortunately, the 1966 catalogue gives only partial details of the provenance prior to Helena Rubinstein. This detail is important since the greatest dealers and collectors of the time, such as Paul Guillaume,

dispersée en 1966 est sans équivoque. Le catalogue de vente de l'époque ne précisait pas l'origine des socles, certains avaient été effacés lors de la mise en page et de nombreux objets n'étaient même pas publiés. Pourtant, les objets de la collection Rubinstein ayant refait surface dernièrement sont quasi-maintenant tous montés sur des supports en bois cérusé et estampillé par Yoshio, nom d'artiste d'Inagaki [3] – à l'exception des pièces n'ayant visiblement jamais été soclée et celles ayant perdu leur socle. Citons l'extraordinaire figure de reliquaire kota de l'ancienne collection Rubin présentée ici, une superbe statue bambara (Parke-Bernet, New York, 21 et 29 avril, *The Helena Rubinstein Collection: African and Oceanic Art*, lot 57 et Klein, 2014, p.96), et un puissant masque *kpélié* sénoufo (Parke-Bernet, op.cit., lot 73 et Christie's, Paris, 15 juin 2002, lot 268SR) pour ne citer qu'eux.

Lors de l'arrivée de Helena Rubinstein à Paris, Inagaki travaillait encore pour le sculpteur Rodin, mais également pour les professionnels du marché de l'art. Comme précisé plus haut, nous ne savons pas si, à l'instar du collectionneur Josef Mueller, Helena Rubinstein faisait elle-même réaliser ses socles par l'ébéniste japonais, ou si les œuvres étaient déjà montées lors de leur acquisition. Le catalogue de 1966 ne mentionne malheureusement que très partiellement les provenances antérieures à Helena Rubinstein. Ce détail est important puisque les plus grands marchands et collectionneurs de l'époque, tels que Paul Guillaume, Charles Ratton, Louis Carré, Stéphan Chauvet ou Béla Hein appréciaient le travail du japonais et travaillaient presque exclusivement avec lui. Ainsi, une provenance « Paul Guillaume » correspond avec quasi-certitude à un socle « Inagaki ». La collection de la fondation Barnes aux Etats-Unis dont les objets proviennent tous du marchand parisien en est un bon exemple.

Certains liens permettent cependant d'effectuer un rapprochement hypothétique. En effet, Helena Rubinstein comptait parmi ses amis proches Jacques Doucet mais également Paul Poiret [2], son mentor en compagnie duquel elle élaborait de nouvelles recettes cosmétiques. Or ce couturier-décorateur avait fait réalisée par Inagaki une série de petits meubles et coffrets pour un parfum qu'il distribuait : Les Parfums de Rosine [3]. Passionnée par la décoration de ses appartements, nous savons également qu'Helena Rubinstein découvrit, certainement en compagnie de Jacques Doucet, les panneaux de laques d'Eileen Gray lors du Salon des Artistes Décorateurs de 1913 [2]. Cette créatrice irlandaise travaillait alors régulièrement avec le laqueur japonais Sugawara, mais également avec son compatriote Kichizō Inagaki. D'après Fitoussi, Helena Rubinstein se rendait fréquemment à sa boutique située rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré à



Jacques Doucet's hôtel particulier, 33 rue Saint-James, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1929 photograph by Pierre Legrain

Charles Ratton, Louis Carré, Stéphan Chauvet and Béla Hein, all admired Inagaki's bases and worked almost exclusively with him. Therefore, the provenance "Paul Guillaume", for instance, almost certainly indicates an "Inagaki" base. A good example is the Barnes Foundation collection in the United States, all of which comes from the Parisian dealer.

Some hypothetical links can be established, however, since Helena Rubinstein was close friends with Jacques Doucet, as well as the fashion and interior designer Paul Poiret [2], her mentor, with whom she developed new cosmetics formulas and who commissioned Inagaki to create a series of small items of furniture and boxes for a scent he was distributing: Les Parfums de Rosine [3]. We also know that Helena Rubinstein was passionate about the interior design of her apartments and, accompanied by Jacques Doucet, discovered Eileen Gray's lacquered panels at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1913 [2]. This Irish designer frequently worked with Japanese lacquer master Sugawara, as well as his compatriot Kichizō Inagaki. According to Fitoussi, Helena Rubinstein was a frequent visitor to his shop on the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, a few metres from her beauty salon. It is therefore perfectly plausible that Helena

Rubinstein met Kichizō Inagaki since they shared a number of friends. However, as to whether Helena Rubinstein directly commissioned bases or furniture from the Japanese cabinetmaker (her numerous spacious apartments needed corresponding furniture), the question remains a mystery.

Living between Paris and New York, Helena Rubinstein was at the heart of the artistic exchange between the two continents. And Kichizō Inagaki's bases accompanied the works on their travels.

We do not know when an Inagaki base was seen for the first time in New York. The major exhibition of African art in the United States—*Statuary in Wood by African Savages: the Root of Modern Art*—in 1914 at Alfred Stieglitz's Galerie 291 does not seem to have included any. Several exhibitions followed in New York in the decade between 1910 and 1920 but were unfortunately not well documented. In 1935, the widely publicised *African Negro Art* exhibition was held at the MoMA, for which many works were loaned by European museums, dealers and collectors—the catalogue mentions 17 loans from Helena Rubinstein—as well as their American counterparts. Since the current state of the African art market has led to many of these works resurfacing, we note that almost all the pieces featured in the exhibition were mounted on Inagaki bases. These include an incredible Dan mask from the former Paul Guillaume collection (Sweeney, 1935, fig.98), a Yoruba knight from the former Carré collection (op.cit., fig.239) and a very fine Senufo statue also from the former Carré collection (Christie's, Paris, 15 June 2002, lot 297).

It is not known whether American visitors showed any interest in the bases on which the African sculptures sat. One thing is certain though—an incalculable number of Yoshio stamped bases crossed the Atlantic as part of the rapid rise in the profile of African arts. Contributing in their own small way, Kichizō Inagaki's discreet and elegant creations reflected the avant-garde ambition at the time to focus attention on the sculpture rather than its original context.

1. Klein, M., *Helena Rubinstein, Beauty is Power*, The Jewish Museum, New York, 2014
2. Fitoussi, M., *Helena Rubinstein, La Femme qui Inventé la Beauté*, La Flèche, 2012
3. Hourdè, C.-W., in *Tribal Art Magazine*, Issue 66, Winter 2012
4. Biro, Y., in *Tribal Art Magazine*, Special Issue no. 3, 2013, p.12



Left: The William Rubin Kota, base  
Below: View of Helena Rubinstein's apartment—several art works mounted by Inagaki are visible.

quelques mètres de son salon de beauté. Ainsi, il est tout à fait plausible qu'Helena Rubinstein ait rencontré Kichizô Inagaki puisqu'ils partageaient un certain réseau de connaissances. En revanche, à savoir si Helena Rubinstein a sciemment commandité la réalisation de socle ou de mobilier à l'ébéniste japonais (ses multiples appartements spacieux nécessitant du mobilier en conséquence), la question demeure un mystère.

Ayant un pied entre Paris et New York, Helena Rubinstein était au cœur de l'échange artistique qui s'initia entre les deux continents. Accompagnant les œuvres en mouvement, les socles de Kichizô Inagaki suivirent le même parcours.

Nous ne connaissons pas à quelle date un socle d'Inagaki fut observé pour la première fois à New York. L'importante exposition aux Etats-Unis dédiée à l'art africain *Statuary in wood by African Savages : the Root of Modern Art* en 1914 à la Galerie 291 d'Alfred Stieglitz ne semblait pas en comporter. Plusieurs expositions, malheureusement peu documentée, suivirent à New York dans les années 1910 et 1920. En 1935 eut lieu la très médiatique *African Negro Art* au MoMA, au cours de laquelle de nombreuses œuvres furent prêtées par des musées, marchands et collectionneurs européens—le catalogue mentionne 17 prêts d'Helena Rubinstein — mais également par des confrères américains. L'actualité du marché de l'art africain faisant resurgir ces œuvres, nous nous apercevons que la quasi totalité des pièces ayant participé à l'exposition avaient été soclée par le japonais. Citons un incroyable masque Dan de l'ancienne collection Paul Guillaume (Sweeney, 1935, fig.98) un cavalier yorouba de l'ancienne collection Carré (op.cit., fig.239) ou encore une très belle statue Sénoufo également de l'ancienne collection Carré (Christie's, Paris, 15 juin 2002, lot 297).



Nul ne sait si la curiosité des américains les poussa à s'intéresser aux supports maintenant en place ces sculptures africaines. Une chose est certaine, un nombre incalculable de socles estampillés Yoshio traversèrent l'Atlantique et accompagnèrent la grande marche vers la reconnaissance des arts de l'Afrique. Y contribuant dans une moindre mesure, les créations de Kichizô Inagaki, à l'esthétique discrète, élégante et mettant en avant l'objet, s'inscrivaient dans la volonté avant-gardiste de l'époque de focaliser l'attention sur la sculpture et non sur son contexte originel.

1. Klein, M., *Helena Rubinstein, Beauty is Power*, The Jewish Museum, New York, 2014
2. Fitoussi, M., *Helena Rubinstein, La femme qui inventa la beauté*, La Flèche, 2012
3. Hourdé, C.-W., in revue *Tribal Art Magazine*, n.66, Hiver 2012
4. Biro, Y., in revue *Tribal Art Magazine*, Special Issue #3, 2013, p.12



# REMEMBRANCES—WILLIAM RUBIN AND “PRIMITIVISM” 30 YEARS LATER

## SOUVENIRS – WILLIAM RUBIN ET LE “PRIMITIVISME” 30 ANS APRÈS

Hélène Leloup

In 1983, Philippe and I were contacted by Bill Rubin, the New York Museum of Modern Art curator, to help him in his research on Tribal Art sculptures for his future exhibition “Primitivism in 20th century Art”. He was a brilliant man; remarkably intelligent. And it was, therefore, always very stimulating to talk with him about the evolution of tribal art and to advise him where to see the best works of African and Oceanic art.

He asked professors and scholars. They were highly specialized, but did not always have an aesthetic approach. He came to us for our guidance in this regard. Even if we did not know all of the museums and collectors around the world, we had firsthand knowledge of the works of art having been deeply involved in the field for many years. Our comparisons were aided by Christie’s and Sotheby’s catalogues together with books on the topic of tribal art, which by that point, started to be more numerous across broad subject matters. Additionally, our conversations among collectors, allowed us to have a good sense of quality and rarity. He kindly thanked us in his preface.

I remember the long conversations we had before going out to dinner in New York, or those we had in his house where we pored over photographs of the pieces and discussed the nuances of each work being considered as part of the discourse of the exhibition ... sometimes until 3 a.m. The black-tie exhibition opening occurred on 19 September 1984, where I was pleased to see Louise Bourgeois again, whom I knew, and other interesting New Yorkers. This event was a huge success in New York, and around the world, and remains a standard-bearer still today.

En 1983, Philippe et moi avons été sollicités par Bill Rubin qui dirigeait le Musée d’Art moderne à New York afin de l'aider dans sa recherche de sculptures d'Art Primitif pour sa future exposition « Le primitivisme dans l'art du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle ». C'était un homme brillant, remarquablement intelligent, de sorte que ce fut très agréable de lui expliquer l'évolution de l'art primitif et de lui indiquer où étaient les meilleures pièces à notre connaissance.

Il s'était adressé à des professeurs ou auteurs de thèse hautement spécialisés mais qui n'avaient pas toujours une approche esthétique et si, nous ne connaissions pas tous les musées du monde et les grands collectionneurs, les catalogues de Sotheby's et Christie's et les livres d'art primitif qui commençaient à se multiplier de même que les conversations entre collectionneurs nous permettaient d'avoir une bonne évaluation de la qualité. Il eut d'ailleurs la gentillesse de nous remercier dans la préface.

De longues conversations suivies d'un dîner à New York ou dans sa propriété nous permettaient de passer en revue toutes les photos d'objets ... parfois jusqu'à 3 heures du matin.

L'inauguration (black tie) de l'exposition se fit le 19 septembre 1984 où j'eus le plaisir de revoir Louise Bourgeois et d'autres sympathiques new yorkais. Cet événement fut un grand succès à New York et dans le monde et reste aujourd'hui une référence.



Installation view,  
“Primitivism” in 20th  
Century Art: Affinity of the  
Tribal and the Modern.  
At right, Picasso's *Les  
Demoiselles d'Avignon*  
(1907).

## Susan M. Vogel

For years, the African art community anticipated the arrival of the Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum to establish a place for African art in the art world. But though the opening in February 1982 was widely and positively reviewed, its influence on collecting and involvement was smaller than hoped. Ironically, a temporary exhibition, Bill Rubin's "Primitivism" at the Museum of Modern Art, was more effective in bringing African and Oceanic art into the orbit of critics and collectors when it opened in September 1984. In a calculated move, the Center for African Art opened the same week with "African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme," the same collection that inspired the Western artists shown in "Primitivism." Bill kindly included a mention of the Center in his exhibition, greatly increasing attendance at our new museum.

"Primitivism" was widely criticized for being ethnocentric and taking a formalist approach that stripped the non-Western works of their original contexts, meanings and purposes. Rubin loved African art passionately and the criticism of "Primitivism" was overblown, but the long, heated controversy became inadvertently useful. Suddenly contemporary art critics were addressing our subject—what Rubin had left out—the African artists, the complex ideas and practices that inform African artworks. The Center for African Art went on to create numerous exhibitions that were a retort to Rubin's presentation of African art, building on the broad wave of interest, debate and criticism raised by his show.

## Michael Kan

Bill Rubin was not only one of the great scholars of the Cubist Movement, but also the first great curator to carry on the traditions set by Barr and d'Harnoncourt of placing MoMA in a pivotal position of bringing African Art connoisseurship into the mainstream. In the process of working on his great exhibit 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art (1984) he became so enamored of African Art that he could not resist acquiring a few seductive pieces he could live with on a daily basis. Bill and I became friends, and Phyllis Hattis was always a great partner to Bill, who encouraged him to indulge his passion of collecting African Art. She really shared his love of this material, and we spent many a happy evening together with the collection discussing issues of connoisseurship. When I recommended this exhibition to my trustees at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts] I asked them how they could possibly miss the once in a lifetime chance of borrowing *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*?

Depuis des années, les amateurs d'Art africain attendaient l'ouverture de l'aile Rockefeller consacrée à l'art Africain au Metropolitan Museum, légitimant enfin l'art qu'ils appréciaient tant. Mais lorsqu'elle ouvrit enfin en février 1982, bien que largement relayée dans la presse, son impact sur le marché et le monde de l'art fut moins important qu'espéré.

Ironiquement, c'est l'exposition temporaire « Primitivism » de Bill Rubin au Museum of Modern Art, qui attira l'attention du monde de l'art, positionnant l'art africain comme une forme artistique significative, tant pour le marché que pour l'histoire de l'art.

Dans un élan commun, la même semaine de septembre 1984, le Center for African Art ouvrit ses portes avec l'exposition « African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme », présentant la collection qui inspira les artistes exposés au MoMA. Gentiment, Bill inclut une référence à propos du Center for African Art dans son exposition, ce qui renforça considérablement notre audience.

Le « Primitivisme » fut largement critiqué comme étant trop ethnocentrique, son approche formelle décontextualisant l'art non-occidental, ignorant sa signification et sa fonction. Rubin aimait l'art Africain avec passion et les critiques de « Primitivisme » étaient exagérées. Paradoxalement, cette controverse lui fut profitable – soudainement ce sujet intéressait les critiques d'art contemporain. Ce que Rubin avait exclu – la question des artistes africains et les idées complexes liées à l'utilisation des œuvres rituelles - fut présenté par le Center of African Art lors de multiples expositions postérieures, profitant ainsi de l'élan d'intérêt, de débats et de critiques suscités par son exposition.

Bill Rubin n'était pas seulement l'un des plus grands spécialistes du mouvement cubiste, il fut aussi le premier grand conservateur à poursuivre les idées initiées par Barr et De Harnoncourt qui souhaitaient faire du MoMA un lieu destiné à rendre la connaissance de l'art africain accessible au grand public. En organisant sa grande exposition « Primitivism in 20th Century Art (1984) », il tomba sous le charme de l'art africain qu'il ne put pas résister à l'envie d'acquérir quelques pièces attrayantes avec lesquelles il pourrait vivre au quotidien. Bill et moi-même sommes devenus amis. Phyllis Hattis était toujours à ses côtés et l'encourageait à entretenir sa passion pour la collection d'art africain. Elle partageait véritablement son amour pour ces objets, et nous avons passé de nombreuses soirées agréables à discuter des enjeux de la recherche. Lorsque j'ai recommandé cette exposition à mes investisseurs du DIA (Detroit Institute of Arts), je leur ai demandé comment était-il possible de rater cette chance unique d'emprunter *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* ?

## WILLIAM RUBIN, THE IMPERTURBABLE VIEWER

Jean-Paul Barbier-Mueller

In the late sixties, my wife and I met a brilliant young woman in San Francisco: Phyllis Hattis. Furthermore, some years later our friend Blanchette Rockefeller invited us to join the International Council of the MoMA. It had to happen: we met William Rubin. A spontaneous friendship lightened up our relationship. He invited me to attend the unpacking of a fabulous painting by Matisse—a black Notre Dame on a blue background—in his office, and I kept quiet trying to tame my wonder.

Bill soon visited Josef Mueller, my father-in-law, in Solothurn, Switzerland. I don't think he could have imagined that this house he'd barely heard of could contain so many treasures: seven works by Cézanne and others by Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, Léger, Hodler (acquired between 1908 and 1914) and the large paintings by Kandinsky. Bill kept quiet, silently striking up an endless conversation with the art. Later, he visited us in Geneva and saw our own collection of primitive art. He could not attend the opening of our museum in Geneva in 1977, but three months later he was standing in front of the window displays asking me not to point out the objects I preferred. He wanted to "recognize" everything by himself. René d'Harnoncourt, Nelson Rockefeller's guide, had showed him the path of silence. He did not care about rarity or provenance. There were only Him and the Work.

In the catalogue of our first exhibition, he wrote a few words to say that he had always unconsciously loved African art. By coming near it in our museum, he had realized that a very special link connected him to these artifacts—free from the admiration of too educated an audience. He was mesmerized by their sheer beauty. In his preface he also mentioned that he had caught himself buying a statuette from Congo and was surprised by his own gesture. From then on he could not live without one, without several of these new, unusual companions. The steadiness and reliability of his eye were highly regarded. He did not buy a lot, but all of his acquisitions were astoundingly high-quality. I remember the day when, filled with joy, he told me: "Finally I could buy the Helena Rubinstein Kota reliquary figure." I rushed to his place. He was sitting on a sofa facing the kitchenette separated from his living room by a bar on which stood the Kota figure. He could not interrupt his conversation with the "new treasure" while I was looking at other works, some old friends. Sometimes, when his conversation with a piece had run its course, he exchanged it for another. In my opinion many of Bill's most beautiful pieces were acquired by Ernst Beyeler, whose museum walls they punctuated like question marks between paintings. Ernst passed away as well. "Primitivism" made Bill's name everlasting, and the works still preserved together as a group at the Beyeler Foundation are sparkling proof of his intimacy with the creations of these men who were no longer craftsmen but were suddenly overcome by the creative genius' Platonic "furor" randomly invading their heart and hands.

## WILLIAM RUBIN, LE REGARDEUR IMPASSIBLE

Jean-Paul Barbier-Mueller

Ma femme et moi, à la fin des années soixante , avions rencontré à San Francisco une jeune femme brillante : Phyllis Hattis. Par ailleurs, quelques années plus tard notre amie Blanchette Rockefeller nous convia à rejoindre le International Council du MoMA. Il était inévitable que nous rencontrions William Rubin. Une sympathie spontanée éclaira nos rapports. Il m'invita à assister dans son bureau au déballage d'un fabuleux Matisse (une Notre Dame noire sur un fond bleu) et je restais silencieux, tentant d'apprivoiser cette merveille. Bientôt, Bill vint chez mon beau-père Josef Mueller à Solothurn en Suisse. Jamais il n'aurait pensé que tant de chefs d'œuvres soient accrochés du plafond jusqu'au plancher dans une maison dont il avait vaguement eu connaissance, sans plus. Devant les sept Cézanne, les Picasso, les Braque, les Juan Gris, les Léger, les Hodler (achevés entre 1908 et 1914), et les grands Kandinsky, il restait muet, établissant un dialogue interminable. Puis il vint chez nous, à Genève, où il découvrit notre propre collection d'art primitif. Quand j'ouvris les portes de notre musée de Genève en 1977, il fut empêché de venir au vernissage. Trois mois plus tard, il était devant les vitrines et me demanda de ne pas lui désigner les objets qui me plaisaient le plus. Il voulait tout « reconnaître » lui-même. René d'Harnoncourt, guide de Nelson Rockefeller, lui avait révélé le chemin du silence. Il se moquait de la rareté, de la provenance. Il n'y avait que LUI ET L'ŒUVRE.

Dans le catalogue de notre première exposition, il écrivit quelques mots pour dire qu'il avait inconsciemment toujours aimé l'art africain, mais qu'en l'approchant chez nous, il s'était rendu compte que quelque chose de particulier le reliait à ces artefacts vierges de toute admiration d'un public trop éclairé, « vierge » et fasciné par leur seule beauté. Il notait aussi dans sa préface qu'il s'était surpris à acheter une statuette du Congo et que ce geste l'avait étonné. Il ne put plus vivre sans un, sans plusieurs de ces nouveaux compagnons insolites. C'est à partir de ce moment que l'on put mesurer la sûreté de son coup d'œil. Il acheta peu, mais tout était d'une qualité stupéfiante. Je me souviens très bien du jour où il me dit, gonflé de joie : « J'ai enfin pu avoir le Kota d'Helena Rubinstein. » Je me précipitais chez lui. Il était dans un canapé, face à la kitchenette qui était séparée de son salon par un bar, la Kota sur celui-ci, et il ne pouvait interrompre sa conversation avec le « nouveau trésor », moi je regardais d'autres œuvres. De vieilles amies. Parfois, rassasié, il faisait un échange, n'ayant pas une grande fortune. Je pense que beaucoup des plus belles pièces sont parties chez Ernst Beyeler, où elles ponctuent les murs, entre les tableaux, de formidables points d'interrogation. Ernst est mort, lui aussi. Même si le Primitivisme a rendu le nom de Bill immortel, ce qui reste groupé à la Fondation Beyeler est une étincelante preuve de sa profonde intimité avec tout ce qui est réalisé par ces hommes, brusquement éloignés de l'artisan qu'ils étaient, saisis par le « furor » platonicien du génie créatif, soudain introduits par le Hasard dans leur cœur et dans leurs mains.



All gallery images in this section: Installation view, "Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*



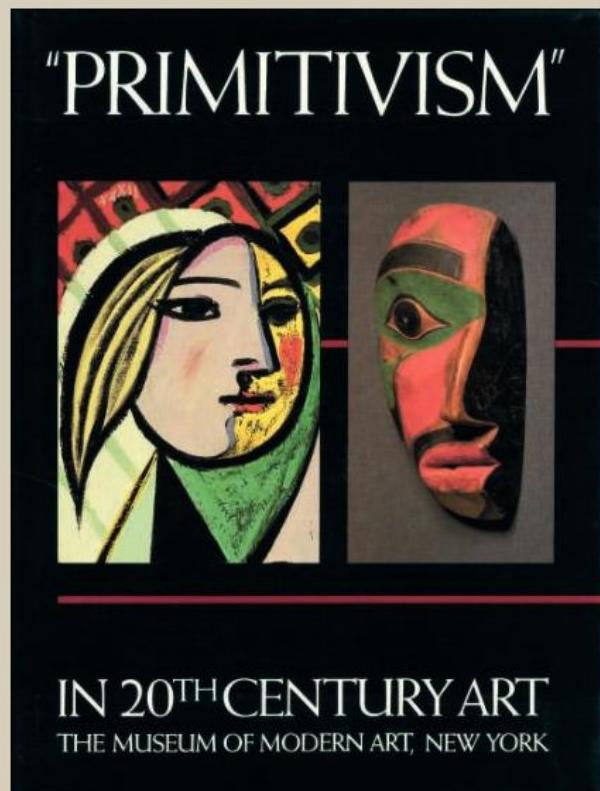


## MODERNIST PRIMITIVISM: AN INTRODUCTION\*

By William Rubin

No pivotal topic in twentieth-century art has received less serious attention than primitivism—the interest of modern artists in tribal [1] art and culture, as revealed in their thought and work.

Upon reflection, it is perhaps not surprising that primitivism has received so little searching consideration, for intelligent discourse on the subject requires some familiarity with both of the arts whose intersection in modern Western culture accounts for the phenomenon. The studies of the two have traditionally remained separate. Until fairly recently, tribal objects were largely the preserve, at least in scholarly and museological terms, of ethnologists. Only since World War II has the discipline of art history turned its attention to African, Oceanic and Native American art. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that much of what historians of twentieth-century art have said about the intervention of tribal art in the unfolding of modernism is wrong. Not familiar with the chronology of the arrival and diffusion of Primitive objects in the West, they have characteristically made unwarranted assumptions of influence. As an example, I cite the fact that none of the four types of masks proposed by eminent scholars as possible sources for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* could have been seen by Picasso in Paris as early as 1907 when he painted the picture [4]. On the other hand, few experts in the art of the Primitive peoples have more than



"Primitivism" in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, exhibition catalogue

a glancing knowledge of modern art, and their occasional allusions to it sometimes betray a startling naiveté [5].

The quite different kinds of illumination cast upon tribal objects by anthropologists and by art historians of African and Oceanic cultures are ultimately more complementary than contradictory. Both naturally focus on understanding tribal sculptures in the contexts of which they were created. Engaged with the history of primitivism, I have quite different aims; I want to understand the Primitive sculptures in terms of the Western context in which modern artists "discovered" them. The ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects—is irrelevant to my topic, except insofar as these facts might have been known to modern artists in question. Prior to the 1920s, however, at which time some Surrealists became amateurs of ethnology, artists did not generally know—nor evidently much care—about such matters. This is not to imply that they were uninterested in "meanings," but rather than the meanings which concerned them were the ones that could be apprehended through the objects themselves [6]. If I therefore accept as given a modernist perspective on these sculptures (which like any other perspective is by definition a bias), I shall nevertheless try to make a virtue of it, hoping that despite the necessarily fragmentary character of our approach—whose primary purpose is the further illumination of modern art—it may nevertheless shed some new light even on the Primitive objects.

Discourse on our subject has suffered from some confusion as to the definition of primitivism. The word was first used in France in the nineteenth century, and formally entered into French as a strictly art-historical term in the seven-volume *Nouveau Larousse illustré* published between 1897 and 1904: "n.m. B.-arts. Imitation des primitifs" [7]. Though the Larousse reference to "imitation" was both too extreme and too narrow, the sense of this definition as describing painting and sculpture influenced by earlier artists called "primitives" has since been accepted by art history; only the identity of the "primitives" has changed. The Larousse definition reflected a mid-nineteenth-century use of the term insofar as the "primitives" in question were primarily fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italians and Flemings. But even before the appearance of the *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, artists had expanded the connotations of "primitive" to include not only the Romanesque and Byzantine, but a host of non-Western arts ranging from the Peruvian to the Javanese—with the sense of "primitivism" altering accordingly. Neither word, however, as yet evoked the tribal arts of Africa or Oceania. They would enter the definitions in question only in the twentieth century.

While primitivism began its life as a specifically art-historical term, some American dictionaries subsequently broadened its definition. It appears for the first time in Webster in 1934 as a "belief in the superiority of primitive life," which implies a





"return to nature." Within this expanded framework, Webster's art-related definition is simply "the adherence to or reaction to that which is primitive" [8]. This sense of the word was evidently firmly entrenched by 1938 when Goldwater used it in the title of *Primitivism in Modern Painting*. The general consistency of all these definitions of primitivism has not, however, prevented certain writers from confusing primitivism (a Western phenomenon) with the arts of Primitive peoples [9]. In view of this, we have drawn attention to the former's very particular art-historical meaning by enclosing it within quotation marks in the title of our book.

The more that bourgeois society prized the virtuosity and finesse of the salon styles, the more certain painters began to value the simple and naive, and even the rude and the raw--to the point that by the end of the nineteenth century, some primitivist artists had come to vaunt those non-Western arts they called "savage." Using this word admiringly, they employed it to describe virtually any art alien to the Greco-Roman line of Western realism that had been reaffirmed and systematized in the Renaissance. Given the present-day connotations of "primitive" and "savage," we may be surprised to discover what are these adjectives identified for late nineteenth-century artists. Van Gogh, for example, referred to the high court and theocratic styles of the ancient Egyptians and the Aztecs of Mexico as "primitive," and he characterized even the Japanese masters he revered as "savage" artists. Gauguin used the words "primitive" and "savage" for styles as different as those of Persia, Egypt, India, Java, Cambodia, and Peru. A self-proclaimed "savage" himself, Gauguin later annexed

the Polynesians to his already long list of "primitives," but he was less drawn to their art than to their religion and what remained of their life-style. Decades before African or Oceanic sculpture would become an issue for artists, the exotic arts defined as "primitive" by Gauguin's generation were being admired for many qualities that twentieth-century artists would prize in tribal art--above all, an expressive force deemed missing from the final phases of Western realism, which late nineteenth-century vanguard artists considered overattenuated and bloodless. With the exception of Gauguin's interest in Marquesan and Eastern Island sculpture, however, no nineteenth-century artist demonstrated any serious artistic interest in tribal art, either Oceanic or African [10]. Our contemporary sense of Primitive art, largely synonymous with tribal objects, is a strictly twentieth-century definition.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw both a change in meaning and a shrinkage in the scope of what was considered Primitive art. With the discovery of African and Oceanic masks and figure sculptures by Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, and Picasso in the years 1906-07, a strictly modernist interpretation of the term began. As the fulcrum of meaning shifted toward tribal art, the older usage did not fall away immediately. "Primitive art" simply became increasingly identified, during the following quarter-century, with tribal objects. As far as vanguard artists of the beginning of the century were concerned, this meant largely African and Oceanic art, with a smattering (in Germany) of that of American Indians and Eskimos (which would become better known among Paris artists only in the twenties and thirties).

In Paris, the term "art nègre" (Negro Art) [11] began to be used interchangeably with "primitive art." This seemingly narrowed the scope of meaning to something like tribal art [12]. But as a term that should have been reserved for African art alone, it was in fact so loosely employed that it universally identified oceanic art as well. It was not until the 1920s that Japanese, Egyptian, Persian, Cambodian, and most other non-Western court styles ceased to be called Primitive, and the word came to be applied primarily to tribal art, for which it became the standard generic term [13]. In Goldwater's book, written the following decade, the "primitive" is synonymous with African and Oceanic art. To be sure, pre-Columbian court styles such as the Aztec, Olmec, and Incan continued to be called Primitive (and artists did not always distinguish between them and tribal art). But this was an inconsistency, and should now be recognized as such. In their style, character, and implications, the pre-Columbian court and theocratic arts of Mesoamerica and South America should be grouped with the Egyptian, Javanese, Persian, and other styles that together with them have constituted the definition of the Primitive during the later nineteenth century [14]. The progressive change in the meaning of the word after 1906 was a function of a change in taste. Consistent with it, pre-Columbian court art enjoyed--except for Moore, the Mexican muralists, and, to a lesser extent, Giacometti--a relatively limited interest among early twentieth-century vanguard artists. Picasso was not unique in finding it too monumental, heretic, and seemingly repetitious. The perceived inventiveness and variety of tribal art was much more in the spirit of the modernists' enterprise [15].

The inventiveness just mentioned, which led in some African and Oceanic societies to an often astonishing artistic multiforality, constitutes one of the most important common denominators of tribal art modern art. Few remaining sculptures of the Dan people, to take perhaps the most startling example, are much more than a century old; yet the range of invention found in their world (pp. 4, 5) far outdistances that of court arts produced over much longer periods--even millennia of Ancient Egypt after the Old Kingdom [16]. And unlike Egyptian society, which placed a positive value upon the static as regards its imagery, the Dan not only explicitly appreciated diversity but recognized the value of a certain originality. As the fascinating study by the ethnologist P.J.L. Vandenhoute showed, the Dan were even willing "to recognize a superior social efficacy in [such originality]" [17]. Although tribal sculptors were guided by established traditional types, the surviving works themselves attest that individual carvers had far more freedom in varying and developing these types than many commentators have assumed. This relative variety and flexibility, along with the con-

comitant incidence of charge, distinguish their art from the more static, hieratic--and often monumental--styles of the court cultures in question (which for the sake of convenience I shall refer to generically as Archaic, in what amounts to but a slight broadening of that term's usual art-historical application) [18].

Objections to the adjective "primitive," on the other hand, focus not unfairly on the pejorative implications of certain of its many meanings [19]. These have had no place, however, in its definition or use as an art-historical term. When Picasso, in the ultimate compliment, asserted that "primitive sculpture has never been surpassed," [20] he saw nothing contradictory--and certainly nothing pejorative--in using the familiar if now-contested adjective "primitive" to identify the art. It is precisely the admiring sense with which he and his colleagues invested the word that has characterized its use in art writing. Employed in this restricted way, the word has a sense no less positive than that of any other aesthetic designation (including Gothic and Baroque, which were both coined as terms of opprobrium) [21]. The "effective connotations" of "primitive" when "coupled with the world art," as Robert Goldwater concluded, are of "a term of praise." [22] As we are using the term Primitive essentially in an art-historical spirit, we have decided to insist upon this sense of its meaning by capitalizing its initial letter (except within quotation marks). All this does not mean that one would not happily use another generic term if a satisfactory one could be found [23]. And, to be sure, William Fagg, dean of British ethnologists of Africa, proposed that "tribal" be universally substituted for "primitive" [24]. But the critics who object to "primitive," object with equal if not greater vehemence to "tribal" [25].

It is clear that art history is not the only discipline that has sought and failed to find a generic term for the Primitive that would satisfy critics. After struggling with the problem for some time, Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that "despite all its imperfections, and the deserved criticism it has received, it seems the primitive, in the absence of a better term, has definitely taken hold in the contemporary anthropological and sociological vocabulary." "The term primitive," he continued, "now seems safe from the confusion inherent in its etymological meaning and reinforced by an obsolete evolutionism." Lévi-Strauss then added a reminder hardly necessary for those who admire tribal art. "A primitive people," he insisted, "is not a backward or retarded people; indeed, it may possess, in one realm or another, a genius for invention or action that leaves the achievements of other peoples far behind" [26]. This last was recognized by modern artists at the beginning of this century, well before the attitudes summarized by Lévi-Strauss were to characterize anthropological or art-historical thinking.





The affirmative attitude to the Primitive, of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Noble Savage* is the best-known embodiment, involved only a segment of the small educated public. It remained, moreover, literary and philosophical in character—never comprehending the plastic arts. Antipodal to the popular view, it tended to idealize Primitive life, building upon it the image of an earthly paradise, inspired primarily by visions of Polynesia, especially Tahiti [27]. If we trace this attitude to its source in Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals," we see that from the start the writers in question were primarily interested in the Primitive as an instrument for criticizing their own societies, which they saw as deforming the innately admirable spirit of humankind that they assumed was still preserved in the island paradise.

The Cubist artist's notion that there was something important to be learned from the sculpture of tribal peoples—an art whose appearance and assumptions were diametrically opposed to prevailing aesthetic canons—could only be taken by bourgeois culture as an attack upon its values.

That the modern artists' admiration for these tribal objects was widespread in the years 1907-14 is sufficiently (if not very well)

documented in studio photographs, writings, reported remarks, and, of course, in their work itself. Artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and Brancusi were aware of the conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety of the best tribal art, which is only simple in the sense of its reductiveness—and not, as was popularly believed, in the sense of simple-mindedness [28]. That many today consider tribal sculpture to represent a major aspect of world art, that Fine Arts museums are increasingly devoting galleries, even entire wings to it, is a function of the triumph of vanguard art itself [29]. We owe to the voyagers, colonials, and ethnologists the arrival of these objects in the West. But we owe primarily to the convictions of the pioneer modern artists their promotion from the rank of curiosities and artifacts to that of major art, indeed, to the status of art at all.

The Fauves—despite their collecting of tribal objects—represent in regard to primitivism, as in regard to style in general, more a synthesis of late nineteenth-century ideas than a radical departure.

It was primarily with Picasso and the Cubists, whose works reflect a direct focus on both the expressing and plastic char-



acter of particular tribal objects, that primitivism entered its twentieth-century phase. More than the work of the Fauves, that of the Cubists endowed the name primitive with a new, more concrete, more focused, and more aesthetically oriented connotation. As of the winter 1906-07, which witnessed the culmination of Fauvism, however, the sense of the Primitive still revolved around Archaic art. Derain's blocky Crouching Man of that time (p. 215) resembles pre-Columbian court or theocratic arts such as the Aztec more than it does any African or Oceanic sculpture he could have seen [31]; and Picasso's Boy Leading a Horse, painted early in 1906, contains an echo of Archaic Greek Kouros, while his work of later 1906 and early 1907 reflects the artist's interest in Archaic sculpture from provincial centers in ancient Iberia (p. 251).

It is true that the Fauves had "discovered" African art in 1906, and had begun to acquire some sculptures, largely from curio dealers. But most of the pieces that first interested them, such as Vili and Yombe figurines (pp. 15, 214), Shira-Punu masks (p. 10), were, not surprisingly, those African objects that as a result of their relative realism, most easily simulated to the inherited

definitions of the Primitive. It has been suggested that the stylized realism and figure types of Yombe sculpture were themselves somewhat influenced by early Western missionaries, and early anthropologists saw a relationship between Egyptian and West African styles [32]; given the Orientalizing character of Shira-Punu masks, which aligns them directly with the exoticism of Gauguinesque taste, all these early choices are understandable. Indeed, we are hardly surprised to hear that when Matisse first showed Picasso an African carving in the fall of 1906, "he spoke," Picasso recalled, "about Egyptian art" [33].

To be sure, the choice of African (and Oceanic) objects in the Paris shops and at the flea market was still severely limited. Although some of the more unfamiliar-looking, more abstract objects, such as Kota reliquary figures (pp. 266, 270, 302), could nevertheless easily be found even before the turn of the century, we hear nothing of these in 1906, nor are they reflected in the work of vanguard artists at that moment. Only after the impact of Picasso's revolutionary *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, completed in late June or early July of 1907, did advanced taste begin to open to the more challenging tribal objects. If, at the height of

Fauvism in 1906, the Primitive still designated Archaic court art and (secondarily) the more naturalistic African styles, by World War I the Cubists had not only changed its meaning to signify predominantly the art of African and Oceania, but had explored some of these cultures' most challenging and abstract forms.

It is not by chance that I chose earlier to elucidate the meaning or primitivism by reference to "japonisme," for the vogue enjoyed by Japanese art in France during the late nineteenth century played a role in the art of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionists comparable in both its superficial and profound aspects to that enjoyed by tribal art in the first half of the twentieth century. In both cases, that role has been as often exaggerated as underestimated. Modern art, we must remember, has drawn on a uniquely broad variety of sources. The growth of museums since the early nineteenth century, and, even more, the documentary use of photography have made available a world of images that earlier artists could never have seen, culminating in the concept of Malraux's "Museum without Walls." This simultaneous accessibility of all historical sources, which sets the modern period off from any other, is encapsulated in the oeuvre of Picasso.

Among the myriad influences absorbed by modern artists, that of the Japanese printmakers (in the nineteenth century) and of the tribal sculptors (in the twentieth) stand apart in their depth and importance [34]. But just how great was that importance? The answer remains clouded, at least as regards tribal art, for the study of the problem is still in its infancy. It will never be possible entirely to clarify the nature of artistic transmission, and of recognizing, not to say measuring, the process. Yet if, on the one hand, we accept that tribal art was the most important non-Western influence on the history of twentieth-century art, we must certainly, on the other, dismiss the often-heard claims that "Negro art engendered Cubism," or that "Primitive art changed the whole course of modern art." As we shall see, the changes in modern art at issue were already under way when vanguard artists first became aware of tribal art. In fact, they became interested in and began to collect Primitive objects only because their own explorations had suddenly made such objects relevant



to their work. At the outset, then, the interest in tribal sculpture constituted an elective affinity.

The sift in the nature of modern art between 1906 and 1908 explains why "art nègre" was "discovered" by vanguard artists in Paris only then and not earlier. Tribal art was hardly, it should be remembered, a buried treasure. The Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (now the Musée de l'Homme), which opened to the public in 1882, had assembled a considerable collection of Oceanic as well as African objects well before the turn of the century. International expositions, such as those mounted in Paris in 1889 and 1900, contained didactic shows of tribal culture—indeed, entire tribal agglomerations—and a number of African and (to a lesser extent) Oceanic sculptures could be found in curio shops for decades before the modern artists took them up. Tribal art would have had no aesthetic relevance, however, for the fundamentally realistic painters of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist generations, exception made for Gauguin. The "discovery" of African art, one must conclude, took place when, in terms of contemporary developments, it was needed. Earlier artists had obviously purchased the occasional tribal works, as is illustrated in our photograph of the studio of Gustave Boulanger (p. 12), a nineteenth-century salon painted



who traveled to North Africa with Gérôme. But such objects were merely colorful studio props. Serious aesthetic interest in them was precluded by prevailing artistic conventions.

This still leaves open, of course, the question of precisely what happened, within the evolution of modern art, that suddenly in 1906-07 led artists to be receptive to tribal art. No doubt there is more than one right answer, but the most important reason, I am convinced, had to do with a fundamental shift in the nature of most vanguard art from styles rooted in visual perception to others based on conceptualization. The styles of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionists (again with the partial exception of Gauguin) derived from concentrated observation of the real world, and in certain respects, the acuity of the artists' vision led to effects of realism beyond those of older painters. To be sure, there is no such thing as purely perceptual painting; the data of the retina are known only through the mind. It suffices, however, that a painter such as Monet wanted to create art as close to the truth of visual sensations as possible. This was less a concern of the Post-Impressionists, and for all Cézanne's emphasis on truth to his sensations *devant le motif*, his Bather compositions in particular were not taken from nature but devised in the imagination, sometimes with the help of other art or of photographs.

It was Gauguin, however, who took the first important step toward a conceptual and thus more "synthetic," more highly stylized art. (We must keep in mind that the conceptualization of visual materials is, in its turn, also a matter of degree, even in "hermetic" high Analytic Cubism, there are many perceptual components.) Gauguin by no means jettisoned the realism of Impressionism, but he was able to meld it, at least in his best pictures, with flat decorative effects and stylized forms whose antecedents were not in Western realism but in nonillusionistic arts as diverse as Egyptian, Medieval, Persian, Peruvian, and Breton (folk) painting and decorative arts (as well as the popular images d'Epinal), and in Cambodian, Javanese, and Polynesian sculpture. This was too much for Cézanne, who dismissed Gauguin as a maker of "Chinese" images [35]. It is not without a certain irony, therefore, that the culmination of the conceptualizing tendency in the first decades of the twentieth century, Picasso's and Braque's Cubism, should be based more on the art of Cézanne than on anything else. But the Cubists' new conceptual reading of Cézanne was profoundly inflected by their experience of the Archaic, conceptual styles that Cézanne himself, still committed to visual perception, disdained—and even more, by their familiarity with tribal art, of whose existence he took no note.



# LE PRIMITIVISME MODERNE: UNE INTRODUCTION\*

par William Rubin

Le primitivisme, c'est-à-dire l'intérêt marqué par les artistes modernes pour l'art et la culture des sociétés tribales [1], tel qu'il se révèle dans leurs œuvres et dans leurs propos, constitue la seule thématique fondamentale de l'art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle à avoir été aussi peu approfondie.

A la réflexion, il n'est peut-être pas surprenant que le primitivisme n'ait suscité que si peu de recherches, car pour tenir un discours pertinent sur ce sujet il est nécessaire de connaître assez bien l'un et l'autre de ces univers artistiques, afin de saisir l'enjeu de leur rencontre au sein de la culture occidentale. Par tradition, ils constituaient deux domaines d'étude distincts. Jusqu'à une époque récente, les objets tribaux relevaient exclusivement de l'ethnologie, du moins pour ce qui concernait la recherche et la muséologie. C'est seulement depuis la Deuxième Guerre mondiale que l'histoire de l'art a pris en compte ce matériel. Dans l'enseignement supérieur, les cours sur l'art primitif [3] restent malgré tout relativement rares, et bien peu parmi les étudiants qui les suivent s'intéressent d'aussi près à l'art moderne. On ne doit donc pas s'étonner de trouver une grande proportion d'erreurs dans tout ce que les historiens de l'art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle ont pu dire sur l'intervention de l'art tribal dans l'éclosion de la modernité. Faute de bien dominer la chronologie de l'arrivée et de la diffusion des objets primitifs en Occident, ils ont fait immanquablement des suppositions gratuites quant aux influences. A titre d'exemple, je citerai le fait qu'aucun des quatre types de masques présentés par des auteurs imminents comme sources d'inspiration possibles pour *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* ne pouvait être connu de Picasso en 1907, année où il a peint ce tableau [4]. Réciproquement, la plupart des spécialistes de l'art des peuples « primitifs » n'ont qu'une connaissance très superficielle de l'art moderne, et quand, d'aventure, ils y font une allusion, celle-ci trahit parfois une naïveté confondante [5].

Les éclairages de nature fort différente que les anthropologues et les historiens de l'art spécialisés dans les cultures africaines et océaniennes ont jetés sur les objets tribaux sont en fin de compte beaucoup plus complémentaires que contradictoires. Les uns et les autres visent naturellement à la compréhension des sculptures tribales dans le contexte où s'est inscrite leur création. Comme je m'occupe de l'histoire du primitivisme, mon objectif est tout différent : je veux comprendre les sculptures « primitives » par rapport au contexte occidental dans lequel des artistes modernes les ont « découvertes ». Les fonctions et significations précises de chaque objet, dont les ethnologues se préoccupent en premier chef, n'entrent pas dans mon propos, sauf dans la mesure où elles étaient connues des

artistes modernes en question. Toutefois, avant les années vingt où certains surréalistes sont devenus amateurs d'ethnologie, les artistes n'étaient généralement pas informés, et de toute évidence ne se souciaient guère, de ce genre chose. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'ils étaient indifférents aux « significations », mais plutôt qu'ils s'intéressaient uniquement aux significations qu'ils pouvaient percevoir grâce aux objets eux-mêmes [6]. Si pour moi, donc, ces sculptures sont situées d'emblée dans une perspective moderniste (qui est par définition un parti pris, comme tout autre perspective), j'essaierai tout de même de faire nécessité vertu, en espérant que, malgré son caractère forcément incomplet, notre démarche dont le but essentiel est de faire une plus grande lumière sur l'art moderne pourra néanmoins projeter quelque nouvelle clarté jusque sur les objets « primitifs ».

Le discours sur notre sujet a pâti d'une certaine équivoque quant à la définition du primitivisme. Ce mot est apparu en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et il est entré officiellement dans la langue française avec un usage réservé à l'histoire de l'art, comme l'atteste le Nouveau Larousse illustré en sept volumes publié entre 1897 et 1904 : « n.m. B.—Arts. Imitation des primitifs [7] ». Si l'« imitation » invoquée par le Larousse est à la fois excessive et trop limitative, l'emploi de ce terme pour désigner des peintures et sculptures influencées par des artistes dits « primitifs » appartenant à une époque antérieure ne s'est pas moins perpétué depuis lors dans l'histoire de l'art. Seuls les « primitifs » ont changé d'identité. La définition du Larousse reflétait l'usage que l'on faisait de ce terme au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle : les « primitifs » en question étaient avant tout les Italiens et les Flamands des XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles. Mais, dès avant la parution du Nouveau Larousse illustré, des artistes avaient donné plus d'extension à l'épithète « primitif » pour l'appliquer aux arts roman et byzantin, ainsi qu'à une multitude d'arts non occidentaux allant du péruvien au javanais. Le sens de « primitivisme » s'était modifié en conséquence. Cependant, aucun de ces deux mots n'évoquait encore les arts tribaux d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Cette acceptation ne le serait donnée qu'au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Alors qu'à l'origine « primitivisme » était un terme propre à l'histoire de l'art, par la suite certains dictionnaires américains ont élargi sa définition. Il est entré dans le Webster en 1934, avec le sens d'une « croyance en la supériorité de la vie primitive » qui suppose « un retour à la nature ». Dans ce cadre élargi, la définition relative à l'art donnée par le Webster devenait simplement « l'adhésion ou la réaction à ce qui est primitif [8] ». Manifestement, ce sens était bien engrainé lorsque Goldwater a utilisé le mot dans le titre de son *Primitivism in Modern Painting*,

en 1938. La cohérence globale de toutes ces définitions n'a pas empêché certains auteurs de confondre le primitivisme (phénomène occidental) avec les arts des peuples dits primitifs [9].

Plus la société bourgeoise prisait la virtuosité et l'ingéniosité des styles de salon, plus certains peintres commençaient à estimer ce qui était simple et naïf, voire frustre et grossier. Tant et si bien qu'à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle quelques artistes primitivistes en étaient arrivés à vanter même les arts non occidentaux qu'ils qualifiaient de « sauvages ». Ils employaient ce terme dans un sens mélioratif pour décrire à peu près tous les arts étrangers à la filiation gréco-romaine du réalisme occidental, que la Renaissance avait consolidée et systématisée. Etant donné les connotations actuelles de « primitif » et « sauvage », on peut s'étonner de découvrir à quelle sorte d'art certains artistes de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle appliquaient ces épithètes. Van Gogh, par exemple, qualifiait de « primitifs » les styles de cour et théocratiques de Egyptiens anciens et des Aztèques au Mexique ; il parlait d'artistes « sauvages » à propos des maîtres japonais qu'il vénérait. Gauguin utilisait les adjectifs « primitif » et « sauvage » pour décrire des styles aussi différents que ceux de la Perse, l'Egypte, l'Inde, Java, ou du Cambodge et du Pérou. L'artiste qui se déclarait lui-même « sauvage », devait ensuite rejoindre les Polynésiens à la liste déjà longue des « primitifs », mais il était moins attiré par leur art que par leur religion et ce qu'il restait de leur style de vie. Des dizaines d'années avant que quelques artistes n'aient commencé à se soucier de la sculpture africaine ou océanienne, leurs devanciers, de la génération de Gauguin, ont admiré les arts exotiques pour plusieurs qualités que leurs successeurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle allaient apprécier hautement dans l'art tribal. Ils admiraient surtout la force d'expression jugée déplorablement absente des derniers stades du réalisme occidental, qui paraissait insipide et exsangue aux artistes d'avant-garde de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Pourtant, à part Gauguin et son intérêt pour la sculpture des îles Marquises et de l'île de Pâques, aucun artiste du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ne manifestait dans son travail un intérêt réel pour l'art tribal, qu'il soit océanien ou africain [10]. Le sens que nous donnons actuellement à l'art primitif, souvent synonyme d'objets tribaux, correspond strictement à une définition du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Les premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle ont vu à la fois un déplacement et un rétrécissement du domaine de l'art primitif. Avec la « découverte » des statues et masques africains et océaniens par Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck et Picasso, en 1906-1907, une interprétation moderniste de ce terme s'est faite jour. Son champ sémantique s'est recentré autour de l'art tribal, mais ses emplois plus anciens n'ont pas disparu tout de suite. Tout simplement, l'« art primitif » s'est confondu de plus en plus avec les objets tribaux au cours des vingt-cinq années suivantes. Pour l'avant-garde artistique du début du siècle, il s'agissait avant tout de l'art océanien et africain auquel s'ajoutait, en Allemagne, un échantillonnage de l'art des

Indiens d'Amérique et des Eskimo (très mal connu des artistes parisiens avant les années vingt ou trente).

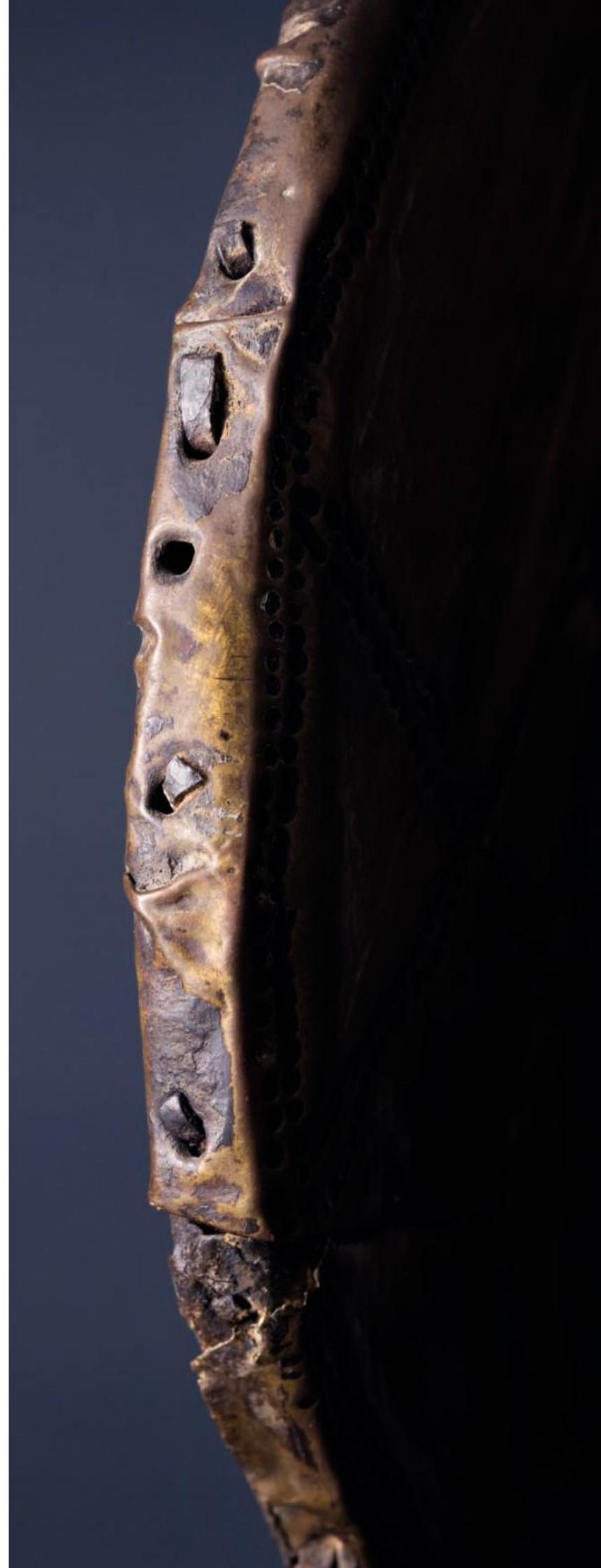
A Paris, « art nègre » et « art primitif » devinrent des termes interchangeables [11]. Apparemment, cela en ramenait la signification à quelque chose comme « art tribal ». En fait, le terme « art nègre », qui aurait dû être réservé à l'art africain, était employé avec si peu de rigueur que tout le monde s'en servait pour désigner également l'art océanien [12]. C'est seulement dans les années vingt que l'on cessa d'appeler primitifs la plupart des arts de cour non européens, japonais, égyptien, perse, cambodgien et autres. Dès lors, ce qualificatif s'appliqua principalement à l'art tribal, pour lequel il devint l'appellation générique courante [13]. Dans le livre que Goldwater a rédigé pendant la décennie suivante, « primitif » est synonyme d'africain et océanien. Certes, on a continué à qualifier de primitifs des styles de cour précolombiens tels que les styles aztèque, olmèque et inca (que les artistes ne distinguaient pas toujours de l'art tribal). Mais c'est un illogisme qui devrait être perçu comme tel à l'heure actuelle. Par leur style, leur caractère et tout ce qu'ils impliquent, les arts de cour et théocratiques précolombiens, de Méso-Amérique et d'Amérique du Sud, se rangent avec les arts égyptien, javanais, perse et autre qui leur étaient associés dans la définition du primitif à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle [14]. Le glissement progressif du sens de ce mot après 1906 procédait d'une évolution du goût. Le corollaire en fut l'intérêt relativement limité que l'art de cour précolombien suscita chez les artistes d'avant-garde dans les premières décennies du siècle, si l'on met à part Moore, les muralistes mexicains et, dans une moindre mesure, Giacometti. Picasso n'était pas le seul à le trouver trop monumental, hiératique et apparemment répétitif. L'impression d'inventivité et de variété qui émanait de l'art tribal était beaucoup plus dans l'esprit du grand dessein des modernes [15].

Cette inventivité, qui aboutit dans certaines sociétés africaines et océaniennes à un art souvent étonnamment multi-forme, constitue un des principaux dénominateurs communs de l'art tribal et de l'art moderne. Pour prendre l'exemple le plus frappant peut-être, parmi les sculptures du peuple dan qui sont parvenues jusqu'à nous, bien peu ont plus d'un siècle. Pourtant, la fécondité d'invention dont témoignent ces œuvres (p. 4-5) dépasse largement celle des arts de cour pratiqués pendant des périodes beaucoup plus longues : plusieurs milliers d'années dans l'Egypte ancienne après l'Ancien Empire [16]. Contrairement à la société égyptienne qui était favorable au statisme pour ce qui concernait son imagerie, les Dan appréciaient visiblement la diversité et, en outre, accordaient de la valeur à une certaine originalité. Comme l'a montré l'étude passionnante de P.J.L. Vandenhoute, les Dan allaient volontiers jusqu'à attribuer une « efficacité sociale supérieure » à cette originalité [17]. Si les sculpteurs tribaux se guidaient sur des types traditionnels préétablis, leurs œuvres encore visibles aujourd'hui prouvent

que, dans la modulation et l'extension de ces types, chacun disposait d'une liberté beaucoup plus grande que l'ont supposé maints consommateurs. Cette relative souplesse et diversité, jointe à la fréquence concomitante des changements, distingue leur art des styles immuables, hiératiques, et souvent monumetaux, des cultures de cour en question (pour plus de commodité, je les désignerai d'une manière générale par l'adjectif archaïque, ce qui revient à élargir un tout petit peu le sens habituel de ce terme en histoire de l'art [18]).

Les objections à l'encontre de l'adjectif « primitif » sont en revanche parfaitement fondées quand elles visent les connotations péjoratives de certaines de ses diverses significations [19]. Mais ces connotations n'existent ni dans la définition ni dans l'emploi du terme en histoire de l'art. Lorsque Picasso, exprimant son admiration, affirma qu' « on a jamais dépassé la sculpture primitive [20] », il ne voyait rien de contradictoire, et vraiment rien de péjoratif, dans l'utilisation de l'adjectif « primitif » très courant bien que discuté aujourd'hui, pour désigner cet art. La valeur laudative que Picasso et ses collègues conféraient à ce terme caractérise précisément l'usage qui en est fait dans la critique d'art. Dans ce sens restreint, primitif n'est pas moins respectueux que n'importe quelle autre dénomination esthétique (y compris gothique et baroque, deux adjectifs dotés à l'origine d'une valeur dépréciative [21]. Comme l'a conclu Robert Goldwater, les connotations effectives de « primitif », quand elles sont associées au mot art, sont celles d'un « terme élogieux [22] ». C'est essentiellement dans cet esprit, celui des historiens d'art, que nous employons ici ce terme, et dans tous les cas contraires nous le mettons entre guillemets pour bien distinguer ses autres sens possibles. Cela ne veut pas dire que nous n'aurions pas utilisé de bon gré un autre terme générique, si nous avions pu trouver un substitut valable [23]. Il est vrai que William Fagg, le doyen des africanistes britanniques, a proposé de remplacer systématiquement « primitif » par « tribal » [24]. Mais ceux qui se sont élevés contre l'emploi de « primitif » s'élèvent avec autant sinon plus d'ardeur contre l'emploi du « tribal [25] ».

De toute évidence, les historiens d'art ne sont pas les seuls à s'être efforcés en vain de trouver un terme générique susceptible de désigner le primitif de manière satisfaisante pour les critiques. Après avoir débattu quelques temps cette question, Claude Lévi-Strauss écrivait : « Malgré toutes ses imperfections, et en dépit de critiques méritées, il semble bien que, faute d'un meilleur terme, celui de « primitif » ait définitivement pris place dans le vocabulaire ethnologique et sociologique contemporain ». Il remarquait un peu plus loin que « le terme de « primitif » semble définitivement à l'abri des confusions impliquées par son sens étymologique et entretenues par un évolutionnisme périmé ». Et il ajoutait ce rappel, guère nécessaire pour ceux qui admirent l'art tribal : « Un peuple primitif n'est pas un peuple arriéré ou attardé ; il peut, dans tel ou tel domaine, témoigner d'un esprit d'invention et de





réalisation qui laisse loin derrière lui les réussites des civilisés [26] ». Ceci, les artistes modernes l'ont reconnu dès le début du siècle, bien avant que l'attitude d'esprit exposée dans ses grandes lignes par Lévi-Strauss soit devenue caractéristiques de toute la réflexion en ethnologie et en histoire de l'art.

Cette attitude positive, dont le « bon sauvage » de Rousseau est l'incarnation la plus connue, ne concernait qu'une fraction d'un public cultivé fort restreint. En outre, elle gardait un caractère littéraire et philosophique, et ne s'étendait en aucun cas aux arts plastiques. A l'inverse de l'opinion populaire, elle tendait à idéaliser la vie primitive, en construisant autour d'elle une image de paradis terrestre inspirée surtout par une vision idyllique de la Polynésie, et en particulier de Tahiti [27]. Si nous repérons cette attitude dans la littérature à partir de son origine dans l'essai de Montaigne « Des cannibales », nous voyons que depuis le début les écrivains utilisaient le primitif avant tout comme un prétexte à critiquer leur propre société, accusée d'altérer l'esprit foncièrement admirable de l'humanité, qui, selon eux, était resté intact dans les paradis insulaires.

Les artistes cubistes pensaient que l'on pouvait tirer des enseignements notables de la sculpture des sociétés tribales, un art dont l'apparence et les enjeux étaient diamétralement opposés aux canons esthétiques en vigueur. Or, la culture bourgeoise ne pouvait percevoir dans cette idée qu'à une attaque contre ses valeurs.

L'admiration des artistes modernes pour les objets tribaux était un phénomène général dans les années 1907-1914, comme l'attestent suffisamment (sinon parfaitement) les photographies de leurs ateliers, leurs écrits, leur propos rapportés et, bien sûr, leurs œuvres elles-mêmes. Des artistes tels que Picasso, Matisse, Braque et Brancusi avaient bien senti la complexité conceptuelle et la subtilité esthétique de l'art tribal de la meilleure venue, qui n'était simple que par son caractère schématique et non, comme on le croyait couramment, par simplicité d'esprit [28]. Si beaucoup considèrent aujourd'hui que la sculpture tribale représente un aspect très important de l'art mondial, et si les musées d'art lui consacrent de plus en plus souvent des salles, voire des ailes entières, c'est par suite du triomphe de l'art d'avant-garde lui-même [29]. Nous devons aux navigateurs, coloniaux et ethnographes l'arrivée de ces objets en Occident. Mais nous devons surtout aux convictions des artistes précurseurs leur promotion du rang des curiosités et de l'artisanat populaire à celui d'art éminent, et même d'art tout court.

Malgré les collections d'objets tribaux rassemblées par ses protagonistes, le fauvisme représentait beaucoup plus une synthèse des idées de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle qu'une rupture radicale, quant au primitivisme et au style en général.

C'est surtout avec Picasso et les cubistes, dont les œuvres reflètent l'attention portée aux aspects expressifs et plastiques

d'objets tribaux particuliers, que le primitivisme est entré dans sa phase du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les œuvres des cubistes, bien plus que celles de Fauves, ont doté le mot primitif d'une connotation nouvelle, plus concrète, mieux cernée et plus nettement axée sur l'esthétique. Mais pendant l'hiver 1906-1907, qui vit l'apogée du fauvisme, la signification du primitif était toujours centrée sur l'art archaïque. *L'Homme accroupi* (p.215) à la forme ramassée, sculpté par Derain pendant cette période, ressemble plus aux arts de cour et théocratiques précolombiens, notamment à l'art aztèque, qu'à n'importe laquelle des sculptures africaines et océaniennes qu'il avait pu voir [31]. *Le Meneur de cheval*, peint par Picasso au début de 1906 contient des réminiscences des kourouï grecs archaïques tandis que son œuvre de la fin 1906 et du début 1907 reflète l'intérêt de l'artiste pour la sculpture archaïque de l'ancienne Ibérie mise au jour dans la province d'Albacete (p. 251).

Il est exact que les Fauves avaient « découvert » l'art africain en 1906, et commencé à acheter quelques sculptures, le plus souvent chez les brocanteurs. Mais la plupart des pièces qui les intéressaient au début, notamment les statuettes yombe et vili (p. 15 et 214), les masques shira-punu (p.10) et les masques gelede, au faciès quasi égyptien, des Yoruba (p.10), étaient justement les objets africains qui, en raison de leur réalisme modéré, se prêtaient le mieux à un amalgame avec les définitions originales du primitif. On a laissé entendre que le réalisme stylisé et les types de figures de la sculpture yombé avaient quelque peu subi l'influence des anciens missionnaires occidentaux, et autrefois certains ethnographes voyaient une relation entre les styles égyptiens et d'Afrique occidentale [32]. Compte tenu du caractère orientalisant des masques shira-punu, qui les rend conformes à l'exotisme selon Gauguin, tous ces choix du début sont bien compréhensibles. C'est à peine si nous nous étonnons d'apprendre de la bouche de Picasso que Matisse, en lui montrant pour la première fois une sculpture africaine à l'automne 1906, lui a parlé d' « art égyptien [33] ».

Certes, l'éventail des objets africains (et océaniens) en vente dans les boutiques parisiennes et sur les marchés aux puces était encore étroitement limité. Et si l'on pouvait facilement se procurer, dès avant le tournant du siècle, certains des objets les plus abstraits et les plus insolites dans leur apparence, comme les figures de reliquaire kota (p. 266, 270, 302), nous n'en entendons pas parler avant 1906 et n'en décelons aucune trace dans les œuvres exécutées à ce moment-là par les artistes d'avant-garde. Il fallut attendre les répercussions des *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, toile révolutionnaire que Picasso acheva fin juin ou début juillet 1907, pour voir le goût moderne s'ouvrir aux objets tribaux plus dérangeants. Tandis qu'en 1906, à l'apogée du fauvisme, le mot primitif recouvrait encore les arts archaïques et (accessoirement) les styles africains les plus naturalistes, dès la Première Guerre mondiale les cubistes avaient transformé l'acceptation du terme pour lui faire désigner

en premier lieu l'art d'Afrique et d'Océanie, et examiné en détail certaines des formes les plus abstraites et les plus stimulantes produites par ses cultures.

Je n'ai pas choisi au hasard d'éclairer le sens du mot *primitivisme* en le comparant à « *japonisme* », car la vogue que l'art japonais a connue en France à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle a joué dans l'art des impressionnistes et des post-impressionnistes un rôle comparable à celui que l'art tribal a joué dans la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Dans les deux cas, ce rôle a été aussi souvent surestimé que sous-estimé. L'art moderne, nous ne devons pas l'oublier, a puisé à des sources d'une exceptionnelle diversité. L'expansion des musées depuis le début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et, plus encore, l'utilisation de la photographie à des fins documentaires ont donné accès à un univers d'images qui était refusé aux artistes des époques antérieures, et a abouti à la notion de « *musée sans mur* » proposée par Malraux. Cette mise à disposition simultanée de toutes les informations historiques, qui différencie la période moderne de toutes les autres, s'est concrétisée dans l'œuvre de Picasso.

Parmi les influences innombrables que les artistes modernes ont assimilées, il faut faire une place à part celles estampes japonaises (au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle) et de la sculpture tribale (au XX<sup>e</sup>) en raison de leur importance et de leur profondeur [34]. Mais quelle fut au juste la mesure de cette importance ? La réponse reste incertaine, du point pour ce qui concerne l'art tribal, car cette question est à peine débroussaillée. En fait, il ne sera jamais possible de l'élucider complètement, tant il est difficile de préciser la nature de la transmission artistique et d'observer ce processus, à plus forte raison de le mesurer. Cependant, si nous admettons que l'art tribal a été la source d'influence la plus importante pour l'histoire de l'art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, nous devons en revanche écarter résolument les affirmations souvent réitérées, que « l'art nègre a donné naissance au cubisme » et que « l'art primitif a infléchi toute évolution de l'art moderne ».

Comme nous le verrons, les changements en question intervenus dans l'art moderne étaient déjà amorcés quand les artistes d'avant-garde ont pris connaissance de l'art tribal. En fait, s'ils ont commencé à s'intéresser aux objets primitifs et à les collectionner, c'est précisément parce que leurs propres recherches avaient soudain créé des correspondances entre ces objets et leur œuvre. Au départ, l'intérêt pour l'art tribal représentait donc une affinité élective.

La mutation survenue dans la nature de l'art moderne entre 1906 et 1908 explique le fait que les artistes d'avant-garde établis à Paris ont découvert l'art nègre à cette époque et non avant. Rappelons-le, l'art tribal n'était pas à proprement parlé un trésor enfoui. Le musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (l'actuel musée de l'homme), ouvert au public en 1882, avait rassemblé une collection considérable d'objets tant océaniens qu'africains bien avant le tournant du siècle. Des expositions universelles comme celles de 1889 et 1900, organisées à Paris, comportaient des présentations didactiques de la culture tribale, en fait des reconstitutions de villages entiers, et l'on pouvait trouver quantité de sculptures africaines ou (dans une moindre mesure) océaniennes dans les magasins de curiosités des dizaines d'années avant que les artistes modernes aient commencé à s'en préoccuper. L'art tribal n'aurait rien pu apporter sur le plan esthétique aux peintres fondamentalement réalistes des générations



impressionniste et post-impressionniste, à l'exception de Gauguin. En définitive, la « découverte » de l'art africain a eu lieu quand l'état des recherches contemporaines l'a rendue nécessaire. Dans le passé, des artistes avaient manifestement acheté quelque œuvre tribale à l'occasion, comme le montre la photographie de l'atelier de Gustave Boulanger (p.12), un peintre de salon du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle qui avait voyagé en Afrique du Nord avec Gérôme. Mais ces objets ne faisaient qu'ajouter une note pittoresque dans le décor de l'atelier. Les conventions artistiques du moment empêchaient de leur porter un véritable intérêt esthétique.

Bien entendu, cela ne nous dit pas quel évènement au juste, dans le cadre de l'évolution de l'art moderne, a soudain rendu les artistes réceptifs à l'art tribal en 1906-1907. Nul doute que plusieurs facteurs soient entrés en jeu, mais le plus important, j'en suis sûr, tient à la mutation fondamentale de la majeure partie de l'art avant-gardiste, qui est passé de styles fondés sur la perception visuelle à d'autres axés sur la conceptualisation. Les styles des impressionnistes et des post-impressionnistes (encore une fois à l'exception partielle de Gauguin) découlaient d'une observation minutieuse du monde réel, et à certains égards, l'acuité de la vision de ces peintres a conduit à des effets de réalisme qui surpassaient ceux de leurs prédécesseurs. Même s'il n'existe pas, certes, de peinture purement perceptive (les informations recueillies par la rétine sont toutes transmises

par le cerveau), il a suffi qu'un peintre tel que Monet ait voulu créer un art aussi proche que possible de l'authenticité des sensations visuelles. Les post-impressionnistes s'en sont moins souciés et, malgré l'insistance de Cézanne sur la fidélité à ses sensations « devant le motif », ses compositions sur le thème des Baigneurs et Baigneuses, pour ne citer qu'elles, ne furent pas prises sur le vif, mais élaborées dans l'imagination, parfois avec l'aide d'un autre art ou de photographies.

Toutefois, c'est Gauguin qui a franchi la première étape importante dans la direction d'un art conceptuel, et partant, plus « synthétique » et plus fortement stylisé. (Etant entendu que la conceptualisation des données visuelles est, elle aussi, affaire de degré ; même dans le cubisme analytique le plus « hermétique », il y a de nombreux ingrédients visuels.) Gauguin n'a nullement renoncé au réalisme de l'impressionnisme, mais il a réussi, au moins dans ses meilleurs tableaux, à le marier à des effets purement décoratifs et des formes stylisées, dont les précédents ne se trouvaient pas dans le réalisme occidental mais dans des arts non illusionnistes aussi divers que la peinture ou les arts décoratifs égyptiens, médiévaux, perses, péruviens et bretons (traditionnels), ainsi que dans les images d'Epinal et dans les sculptures cambodgiennes, javanaises ou polynésiennes. Cézanne ne pouvait le suivre sur ce terrain, et à ses yeux Gauguin n'était qu'un faiseur d'images « chinoises [35] ». C'est donc en quelque sorte par un curieux retour des choses que l'aboutissement des tendances conceptualisantes dans les premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, à savoir le cubisme de Picasso et Braque, s'est appuyé avant tout sur l'art de Cézanne. Mais la nouvelle lecture conceptuelle de Cézanne effectuée par les cubistes se ressentait grandement de leur fréquentation des styles conceptuels archaïques, que Cézanne dédaignait car il restait attaché à la perception visuelle, et plus encore, de leur connaissance intime de l'art tribal, dont Cézanne ne s'était pas avisé de l'existence.



# 'AT THAT MOMENT, I REALIZED WHAT PAINTING WAS ALL ABOUT'

par William Rubin

## FOREWORD

When analyzing Picasso's work of the Africanism period, there is an oversimplified explanation that he was drawn to the abstraction of African art, and that his interest was almost purely formalistic. However, he already had access to what he considered 'primitive' and, thereby, abstraction through 'archaic' works—Egyptian, Greek, and Iberian.

Rather, as he later reflected to Françoise Gilot and André Malraux, a sort of living nightmare turned revelation at the Trocadéro—'Painting isn't an aesthetic operation. It is a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors, as well as our desires. When I went to the Trocadéro, something felt stuck in my throat. I wanted to leave, but I stayed and studied. Men made these masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediator in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it an image. When I came to that realization at there, I knew I had found my way.'

The text herewith is adapted from Rubin's writings on Picasso and African and Oceanic Art's influence in 'Primitivism' (1984)

'Introduction' (pp 1-84) and his chapter 'Picasso' (pp. 240-343), as no one understood this subject nor considered it so thoroughly and critically based upon his relationship with Picasso, firsthand sources, and historical references.

## WILLIAM RUBIN ON PICASSO AND KOTA SCULPTURES\*

In no other artist's career has primitivism—in the archaic sense—nor African and Oceanic art, played so pivotal and historically consequential a role as in Picasso's. It was critical (though in diminishing proportions) in three periods of redirection in his work: between his return from Gosol in 1906 and the resolution of his early Cubist style in winter 1908-09; during the formation—in the context of collage and construction sculpture—of Synthetic Cubism in 1912-13; and in the new directions of both his modeled and constructed sculpture in the early thirties. Overarching these particular interventions were primitivist instincts that represented an abiding strain in Picasso's psychology. They could only have been reinforced by the continuous presence of tribal objects in his studios from 1907 until his death.



Left: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907  
Above: Picasso in his studio in the Bateau-Lavoir, Paris.  
Photographed for Gelett Burgess, 1908.

Picasso's empathy toward African and Oceanic Art was so profound and apparent that the earliest critics identified him as the key protagonist of twentieth-century primitivism despite the knowledge that Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, and perhaps others had 'discovered' African sculpture before he did.

Picasso's superstitiousness, exaggerated fear of death, and early competitive relationship with his father engendered the psychological plane that is the locus of his special sympathy to African art. Convinced that the art he experienced in his childhood was no longer viable, it was, he believed, encumbent upon him to provide new alternatives. Precisely what was wrong with the old ways would only become entirely clear to Picasso in the 'shock' and 'revelation' he experienced before the tribal masks and power objects, 'fetishes', in the Musé d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro: 'At that moment,' he said later, "I realized what painting was all about'.

'That moment', and epiphany of June 1907, discussed in detail below, was made possible, however only by a year-long evolution triggered by a Louvre exhibition of Archaic Iberian reliefs from Osuna. This inspired his 'Iberian' style., which fully took root the following fall. It constituted the first important stage of his primitivism.

What follows is his painting in 1905-06 of Gertrude Stein, where, dissatisfied with her likeness—after some ninety-two sittings, according to Stein—Picasso wiped out the face. Later, he repainted in from memory in an Iberian schema. This principle, which then holds to his Africanism of 1907-08, or early Cubism of 1908-09—remained inviolate—"the great law that dominates the new aesthetic is the following: conception overrides perception". This is quoted from André Salmon, who very likely was quoting Picasso himself.

One of Picasso's first influences in the practice of integrating the form and conceptual solutions of African and Oceanic art came from Gauguin, whom he knew. It was Gauguin who took the first step toward a conceptual and thus more 'synthetic', more highly stylized art, apart from the Impressionists or Post-Impressionists focused on the visual and solutions of color, light and surface.

Picasso began working on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1906, frustrated, he paused in the spring of 1907, but revisited and finished it by July 1907. Many different types of African and Oceanic masks have been posited as direct influences, but most of these originate from the Congo, with no direct colonial

link to France, and thereby not seen in the museum in Paris as early as 1907.

Though the three 'masked' demoiselles of Picasso's picture have little direct relations—except for scarification markings—to any masks Picasso could have seen at the time, they bear affinities, at least in the daring of their abstraction (as well as in aspects of their surface patterning), to a type of tribal object that was indeed visible very early at the Trocadéro and available even before the turn of the century in the curio shops, namely, the copper-covered reliquary guardian figures of the Kota and Hongwe peoples. The Kota figures, which both Alfred Barr and Golding had associated with the Demoiselles, are found in an impressive variety. Some of this range was already evident in those in the Trocadéro at the time of Picasso's visit. Their heads range from quite realistic visages streaked symmetrically by diagonals that are not scar marks and are sometimes called stylized 'tears' to exceedingly





Alberto Giacometti in the studio at Rue Hippolyte Maindron, 1927.



abstract conceptions where the face consists of nothing but a relieved vertical running centrally from top to bottom between two hemispheric eyes. Others contain a wide variety of parallel line designs that derive from scarification patterns. The shapes of the heads usually are roughly oval extended occasionally into stylized lozenges.

Taken together, the Kota and Hongwe reliquary figures—certainly the most abstract of the African sculptures Picasso encountered—constitute, along with Baga figures and Fang masks and reliquary heads the most important African prototypes for Picasso's art from June 1907 until the summer of the following year. The painter owned two Kota reliquary figures and though there is no documentation, photographic or otherwise, as to when he acquired them, the simplicity, rawness, indeed the very mediocrity of both of them—quite apart from their influence on his work in 1907—suggest that they were among the earliest tribal objects he acquired.

By the start of World War I, Paul Guillaume possessed some very fine Kotas, as witnessed by those lent to Alfred Stieglitz in New York for his exhibition at 291 gallery organized by Marius de Zayas in 1914—‘Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art’. Picasso did not reach for Kota sculptures of this same quality, in part because they were surely very expensive.

The lozenge-shaped lower supports for the heads of the Kota reliquary guardians are usually taken—erroneously—as legs. And the readings by the modern artist were no exception. If we imagine them as legs, the reliquary figure as a whole suggests a dancer—as we see in the little leaping personage in Klee's idols—whose heels are together and whose knees are splayed out in profile below the frontal head. Picasso was evidently sufficiently



Pablo Picasso, Sheet of Studies, 1907



Pablo Picasso, *Nude with Raised Arms*, 1907

fascinated by this bent knee position to explore it in paintings such as *Nude with Raised Arms* (1907) known generically as 'Dancing Figures' or 'African Dancers'.

In this period Picasso worked conceptually, without models, so that in making his related drawing, his inspiration was triggered rather by a generalized recollection of Kota reliquary figures than by any individual object. Unlike Klee, who retained the lozenge shape of the 'legs' of the Kota figures by keeping the ankles together, Picasso was interested only in the radically bent knee, and in that only as a starting point. In the upper right figure of the drawing, the feet are together, but even there the legs are treated asymmetrically—an asymmetry that would mark all the paintings derived from this motif, thus putting these paintings at a still greater remove from the reliquary figures. In this unusual sheet of drawings, we see Picasso exploring a transformation of

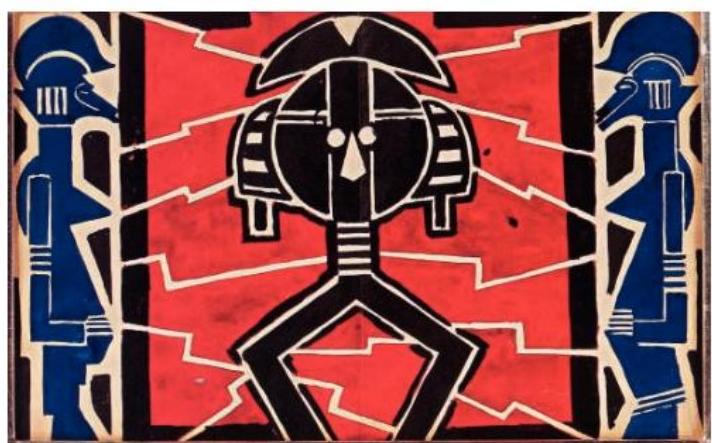


The Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, c. 1910.

the flat, planar disposition of Kota figures' 'legs' into formulations that assimilate the bent-knee position to rudimentary forms of space—the detritus of premodern Western space—had just been established in the *Demoiselles*, and constituted the first step toward the Cubist space that followed it.

If the legs of Picasso's 'Dancing Figures' thus bear an indirect relation to Kota reliquary guardians, the position of their arms, raised and bent over their heads, corresponds to that of the central figure in the *Demoiselles* and was thus already part of Picasso's vocabulary during his late Iberian phase. Indeed, it was probably extrapolated from Cézanne's *Bathers*. Such types of African caryatids as he could have seen in 1907 obviously interested him, as the noted drawing attests, but they can hardly be counted a source for the raised-arm positions of the 'Dancers'.

More important, however, than any visible borrowings was Picasso's sense of African objects as charged with intense emotion, with a magical force capable of deeply affecting us. This went hand in hand with his understanding of the reductive conceptual principles that underlie African representation. On this level, Picasso's debt to African art was not superficial but profound. In the noted drawing, the presence of Picasso's hand, which rises from the bottom of the sheet as if magically commanding the activities of the figures, is an important link to the Primitive tradition. Picasso had already developed the sense of the artist's hand as a kind of thaumaturgic wand. In *Boy Leading a Horse* of 1906, the unbridled animal seems to follow the boy as if mesmerized by the power of his gesture. Although oversimplified and perhaps anthropologically incorrect, Picasso's assumptions about tribal usages—the laying on of the shaman's or healer's hands, for example—could only have reinforced his personal sense of the magical. And as the 'fetishes' were religious objects, the notion of art-making and of religion became fused in a consciousness of the force of the artist-shaman's hand. In the drawing, one of the earliest of Picasso's many representations of his own hand, he makes this explicit by the 'lines of force' that emanate from it. His hand is repeated in another position in the center of the drawing, where again the emanating lines of force suggest that the hand magically 'commands' the movement of the figures, thus paralleling metaphorically the reality of Picasso's hand as the agent of their creation. The representation of the artist's hand in isolation—found from the cave painters to Pollock—is always an allusion to the notion of image-making as a supernatural, ritual power, which is the conception that overwhelmed Picasso in his 'revelation' at the Trocadéro.



Fernand Léger, *La création du monde*, 1923



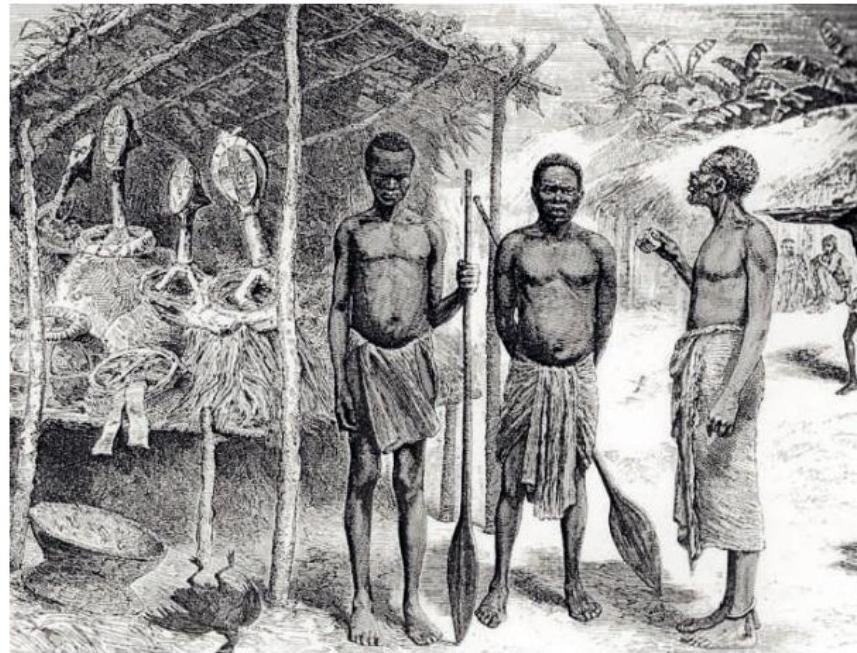
# THE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA: AN ICON OF AFRICAN ART

By Louis Perrois

Since it appeared in the famous exhibition "African Negro Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1935—lent to the show by its then owner, Helena Rubinstein—this impressive Kota reliquary figure has been celebrated as one of the most iconic examples of equatorial African art. Its image has been imprinted in our minds through its extensive presence in publications and exhibitions. Before they were brought to Europe by administrators, missionaries or tropical products brokers (also known as "bush riders"), these wooden, copper-plated figures were revered objects, lashed to large reliquary baskets where they presided over the relics of ancestors. People called them *mbulu-ngulu*, meaning "basket with a figure." In Kota from Haut-Ogooué, the words *ngulu nguru* and *nyelu* mean 'in the form or appearance of something or someone'; whereas the word *nbulu* refers to a piece of basketwork or sometimes interlaced leaves. In the 19th century, there were countless figures of this type (with different formal variations, cf. Perrois, *Kota*, 2012, p. 5479), in the villages of the high valley of Ogooué and its surroundings, from the North as Okondja and Mekambo to the south as Zanaga, Sibiti and Mossendjo in Congo (cf. *Kota* 2012 *ibid.*, p. 6).

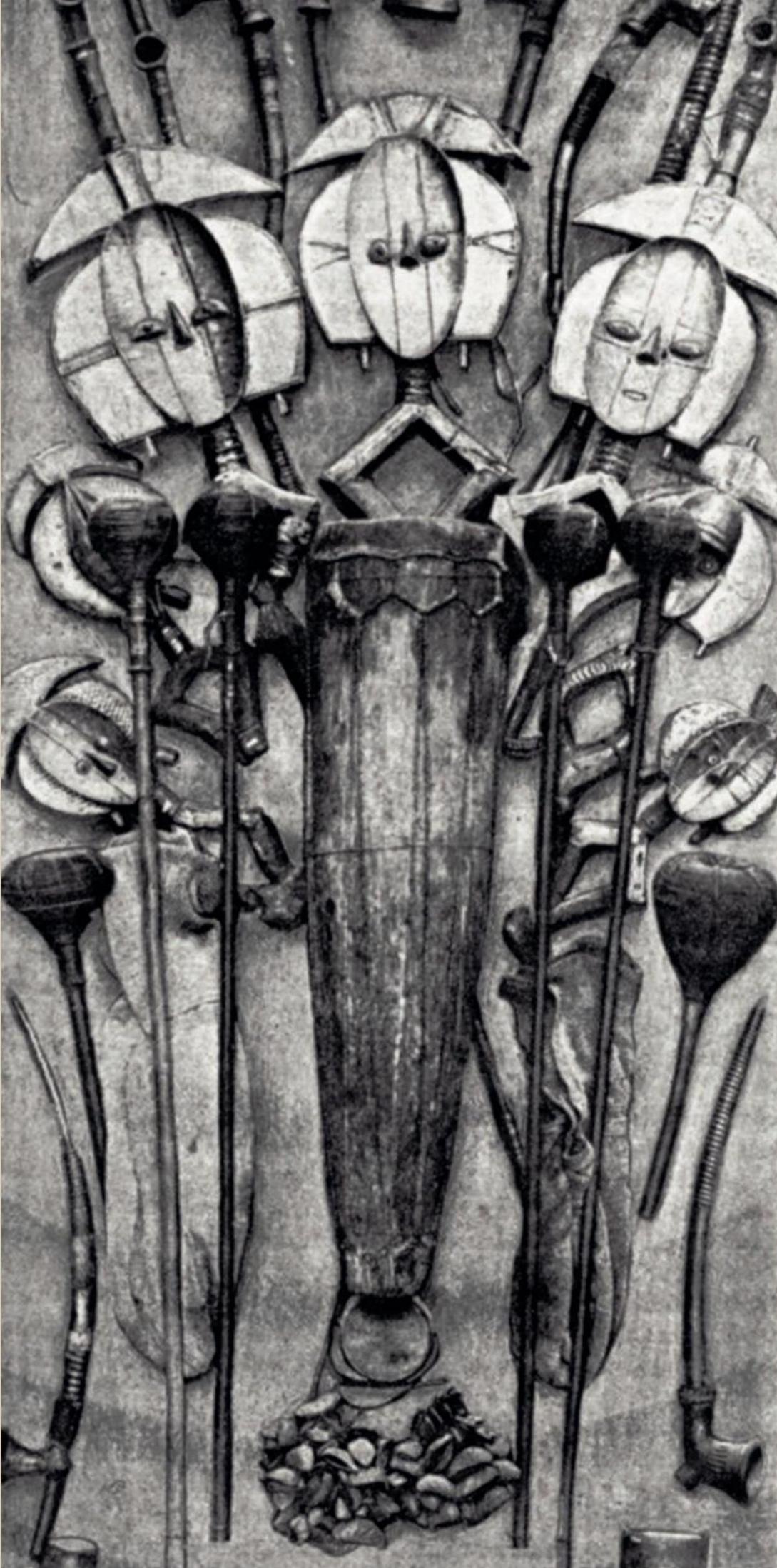
William Rubin's *ngulu* is particularly impressive at 66 cm. high and 40 cm. wide. Stylistically, it presents several Obamba Kota particularities: a transversal crescent headdress, rounded lateral sides, and a stylized oval face. The only anatomical details are a longitudinal stripe for a nose and eyes represented by oval forms fixed with screws, a Kota Shamaye "signature." Such a composition, extremely graphic and reductive, swiftly seduced Western collectors in the 1920s.

This reliquary figure can be compared to a historical *ngulu*, collected by Attilio Pecile and Giacomo di Brazza during the "West African Missionary" in the 1880s and conserved at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris (MQB, ref. Inv. 71.1884.37.22, H= 40 cm). We find there a particular face shape that is "foliaceous", narrower than the Rubin Kota, and adorned only with embossed eyes. According to the notebook and sketches of routes of G. di Brazza, this object was found among Kdumu Kota (called Ondumbo by explorers) not far from the Shamaye Kota region on the right side of the river.



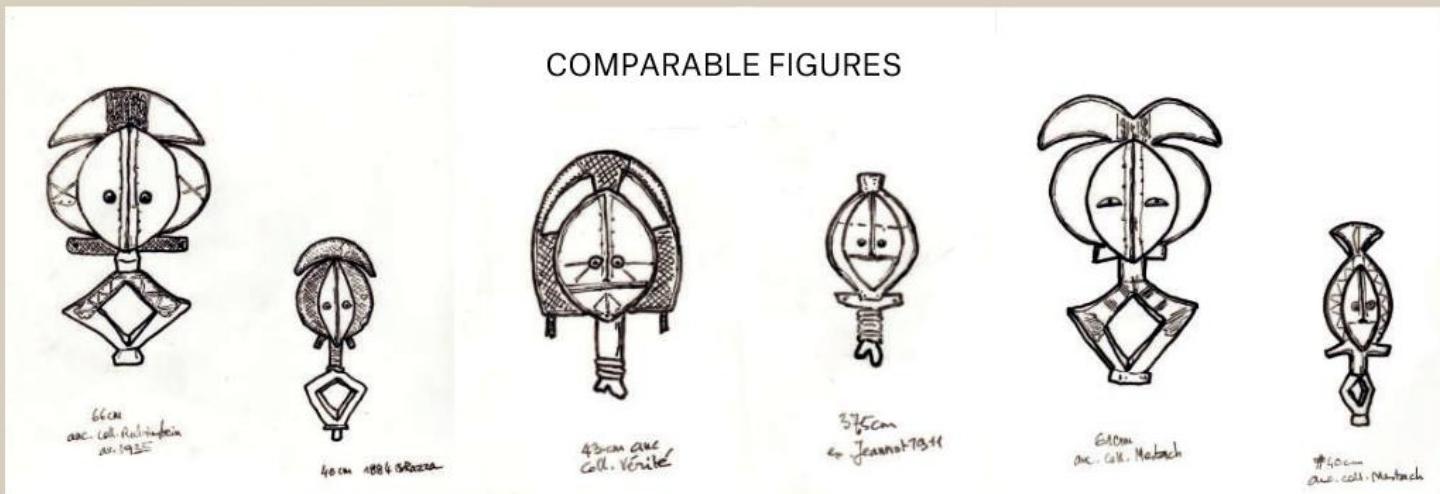
*Mbumba-bwete* in situ in Upper Ogooué observed by Brazza (in revue « Le Tour du Monde », 1887, II, p.328)

For a long time, the Ndumu Kota were the "enemy brothers" of the Obamba from the Masuku-Franceville region. The Ndumu began, before the Obamba, a North-south migration from the area of Sangha in the 18th century. These two civilizations could converse without an interpreter, an important indicator of their common roots. Moreover, the Obamba and Ndumu practiced the same matrilineal tradition and, as a result, often intermarried. Nevertheless, the Ndumu, as frequent victims of slave raids and cattle robberies, remained wary of Obamba. Finally, it was Brazza and his comrades who, thanks to contacts around Haut-Ogooué zone (on the current border of Gabon and Congo) and a proactive policy of intertribal appeasement (obviously favorable to trade), broke up the Mbete-Obamba expansion in Gabon in the late 19th century. Their latent domination over the Haut-Ogooué region for over a century ended in a final confrontation that took place close to a Mamvubu village, on the right side of the Passa (Masuku-Franceville region). It is conceivable, though, that ongoing contact and symbolic (and therefore gradually stylistic) comingling left a mark on the design of ancestral figures.



A group of "Kota" artworks formed by Obamba and Ndumu objects from the West African Mission (Brazza), 1889, Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris.

## COMPARABLE FIGURES



Ex Rubinstein 66cm

Brazza, MOB, 40cm

ex Vérité, 43cm

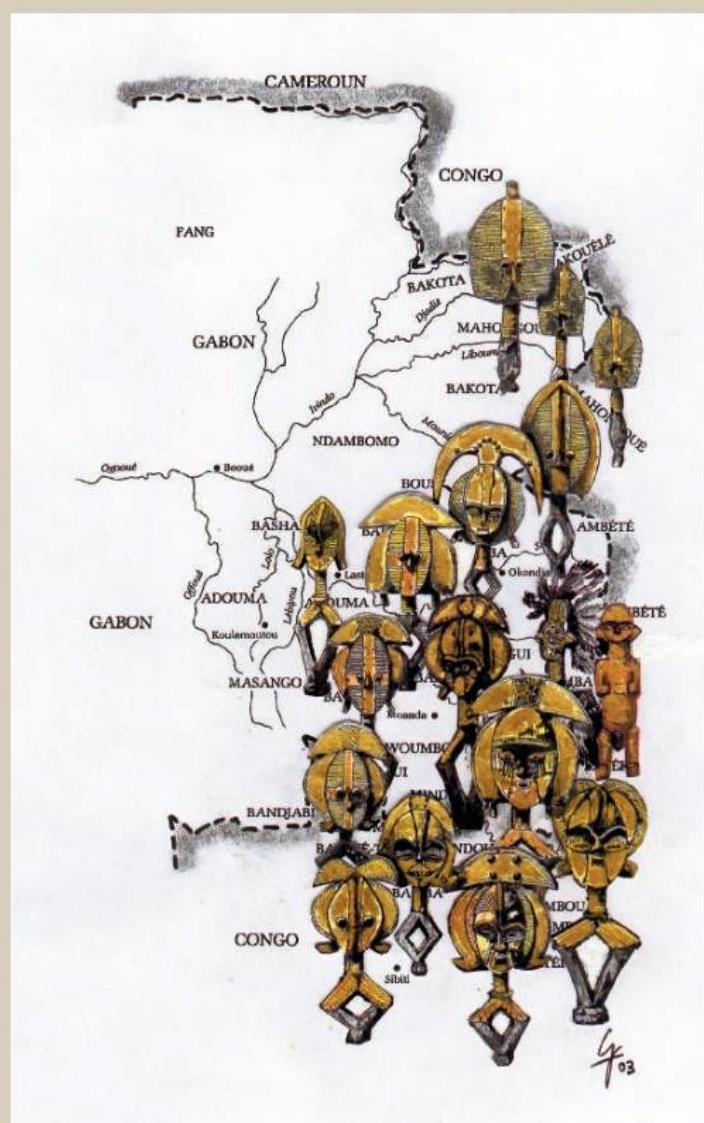
ex Jeannot 1911 37cm

ex W.Mestach 61cm et 37cm

Other Kota figures, allied by their oval-almond shaped face though they belonged to different collections (Guerre, Kamer, Fourquet, Falluet, etc.), constitute a remarkable stylistic variety (cf. Perrois, *Arts du Gabon*, 1979, pp. 174-175), with headdresses more or less wide—some in a simple vertical tenon and others with transverse crescent refolded rims (Pierre Vérité's former collection, catalog of June 2006, n°198, without base, 43 cm.) or with a double crescent (W. Mestach's former collection, 61 cm., broken horizontal pendants). We can assume that this surprisingly stylized and almost abstract pattern comes from the border of North Kota (Mahongwe and especially Shamaye) and South Kota (Obamba, Wumbu, Ndumu), taking both an extremely uncluttered style, almost "cubist", and a classic structure, with a headdress crescent and a hollowed diamond-shaped base. Another detail common to all of these effigies is the horizontal appendices located at the base of the face, which can be interpreted as earrings. On the Rubin Kota, these appendices are decorated with a lattice pattern and drilled on their ends to hang chains or necklaces.

At the back, there are no metal plaques, as typical, and a diamond-shaped bas-relief pattern brands this effigy, recalling the base opening. Throughout Gabon, the diamond as an engraved or carved pattern is a symbolic nod of the female sex, the source of life. We find the same sign as a border strip on the central decoration of the headdress crescent, which is a seal of identification clan.

The *mbulu-ngulu* from the William Rubin's collection, in its majestic stature and with its abstract, almond-shaped face, demonstrates the unfettered imagination of initiated Kota. It is proof, if proof were needed, of the subtle spirituality that these equatorial African people practiced, and which they expressed in this statuesque masterpiece.



Map showing the diversity of Kota figures in eastern Gabon in the 19th Century

# INNOVATION AND TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNIQUE WILLIAM RUBIN KOTA

By Frederic Cloth

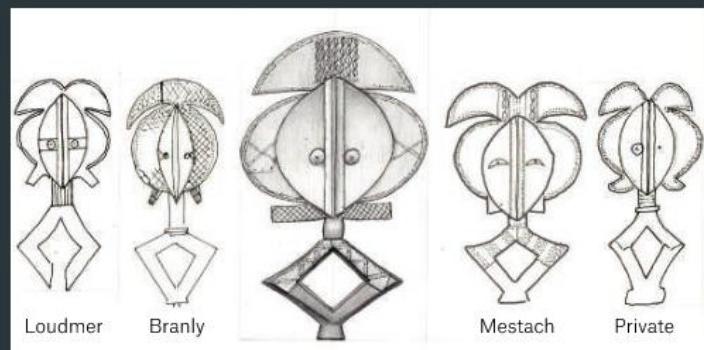
We have a tendency to perceive African Arts mostly as the expression of a tradition. Essentially, we tend associate shapes (styles) with tribes, neglecting two key aspects of art: the artists themselves and the nature of what is represented.

We easily accept the fact that "African artists are anonymous" and that they produce generic implements such as "ancestor figures", "masks"... partly because we miss information, partly because broad classifications are easier to handle, but also partly because we seek a fundamental nature in African creation which transcends authorship, time and representation.

This object reminds us that African Art, as every art, is elaborated as much on innovation than on tradition.

Let's have a look at our object: one of its most striking specificity is its almond shaped face with a nose line dividing it in two. Few objects share this characteristic.

- one in the Mestach collection in Brussels, possibly from the same workshop.
- one collected by the Brazza expedition presumably in Ondumbo territory and now in the collection of Quai Branly.
- one from an American private collection.
- one from a French private collection (Loudmer).



Although they share that specificity, there are notable differences which lead us to conclude that this object is apparently unique.

But then comes a question: how can a unique object be traditional?

To better understand this object we need to pay attention to precisely what we have neglected so far: the creative process of artists and the meaning attached to the figure they carve.

The oldest examples we know of Kota figures (at least with scientific dating) date from the XVII-XVIIIth century. We see on those sculptures that most of what makes kota art distinguishable from their neighbor's had already been invented: use of metal, a crescent shaped panel on top, a face - sometime concave, sometime convex—with lateral panels, and a body abstracted to a diamond shape.

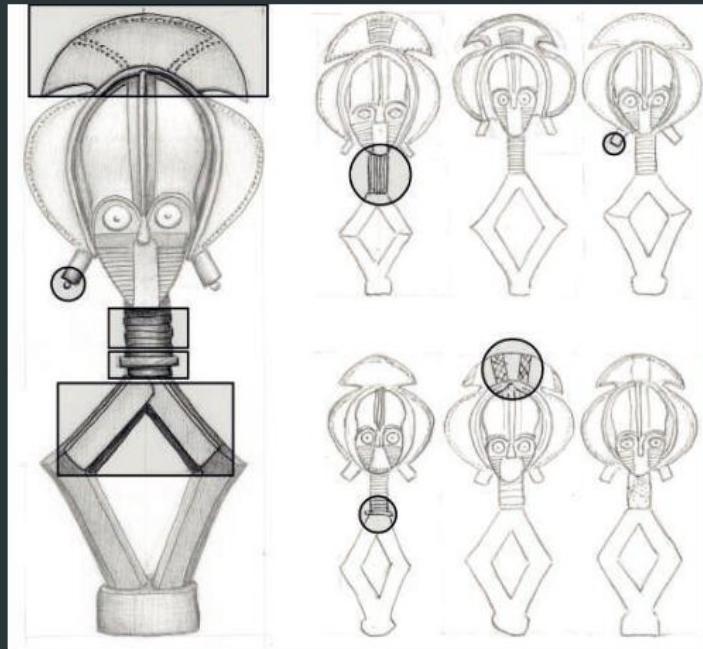
Most importantly we can see that already at that time care was taken to individualize every statue. If we look at a set of very old figures by the master(s) of the Sebe river, we can see that, although they resemble each other, every statue has a combination of distinctive details that makes it unique.

And then, from the XVIIth to the XXth, kota (in this case more precisely Obama) people continued to produce figures, each of them unique. Just imagine how complicated is the challenge: you have to make a figure where most aspects are dictated by tradition, but yet you have to make it different of every other statue produced in 3 centuries and that you haven't even had an occasion to see.

Probably motivated by that problem we observe that in the early XIXth century, two different group of artists, two schools, emerged in Obama statuary:

One group (let's call them the conservatists) continued to produce what is basically the same than the old style to the risk of making "duplicates" (not mentioning mass produced figures for colonials, we can indeed see a [very] few duplicates appearing in the late XIXth-early XXth).

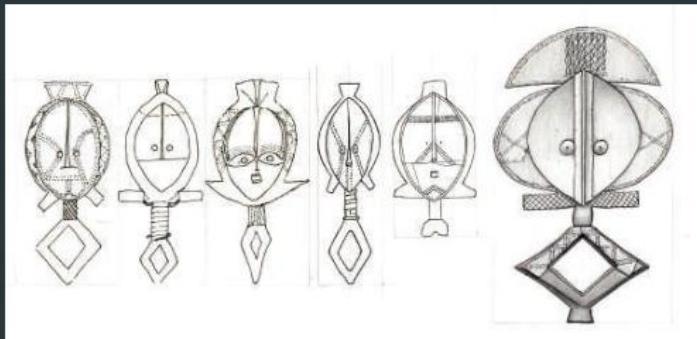
Another group (let's call them the innovators) apparently came to the conclusion unicity was more important than tradition and started inventing new shapes and complex decorative schemes that were a guarantee of unicity.



Details used as unicity markers in the Sebe master's style male figures: crescent, ear, neck, and shoulder decor and necklace.

Of course masters of the innovative school wouldn't come every time with a new shape: they would invent some and reuse them regularly, and often they would get inspiration or borrow ideas from other masters. Yet, in about a century and in a somewhat small area (East central Gabon, near Okondja and Otala), they managed to create about a dozen new shapes. To make things clear, we are describing an art history with creators taking radical decisions and not a rigid tradition.

Our object is probably an inventive variation on the theme of this often represented female character:



We know the influence Kota reliquary sculpture has had on western art, and especially on analytical cubism. One of the very owner of this object, Mr William Rubin, has done much to establish that fact historically.

Artists of all time have had the problem of translating a three-dimensional world on a flat media. Kota as well as Cubists came with the solution of unfolding bodies, which have for Kota as well as Cubists, consequences: geometrization (if you unfold, you introduce folding lines which is an incentive to geometrize), elusion (since you "consume" space with unfolded parts of a volume, you need to make some room) and of course cohabitation of various perspectives (which happens naturally through unfolding).

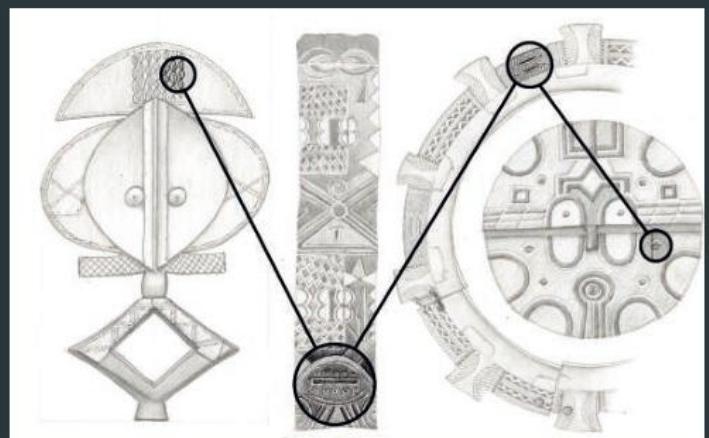
On Kota sculpture in general and this one is no exception, we can see those mechanisms in action: the top crescent shaped panel is likely to represent an Iroquois/Mohawk hairstyle rotated. The side panels are named "cheeks" by Ndassa (one of the tribes of the Kota group) and could be seen somehow as profile views of the head attached to the frontal view. To them, the lower extension of the "cheeks" (which here is likely the horizontal bars coming out of the neck) are named "ears" which makes sense as ears are indeed most visible from the side and are never represented on the frontal view. Then comes the lower diamond-shaped structure: this can be read as arms, folded with the hands attached together where the rest of the body has been eluded. If you think of the whole installation, those arms would be partially buried in a basket filled with relics. The kota guardian figure literally hold in its (probably "her" in this case) arms the relics which is indeed a good way to illustrate the concept of protection but also a way to give back a body (you could understand it as a "raison d'être") to the figure.



Arms represented on various kota obamba and ambete figures.

To this common (but already quite exceptional) ground, this figure adds a play that we can assume is intentional.

If we look at the crescent of this object, we can see a decor made by the repetition of an eye-shaped symbol. This symbol can be observed on Teke statuary (especially *kidumu* masks, *nkita* planks and chiefal torques) as well as on many kota reliquary figures since the XIXth century. One shouldn't be surprised of this: "southern kota" people (Obamba, Ndassa,... by contrast with "northern kota" such as Mahongwe) share many traits with Teke, to begin with a relatively close language.



Lebee symbol on various Teke objects.

Within Teke symbolic alphabet, those "eyes" are named "lebee" and roughly depict [or give] the ability to see the invisible "spiritual" world. Repetition, within Teke decorative grammar, is a way to emphasize a concept: to make it short, two *lebees* "see" better than one.

Looking at the kota this way, we see kind of a message: "this object sees very well" (in the mystical understanding of "seeing"). Yet, we could argue that though there are many "lebees" represented, they are all quite small.

Now look at the face...

**ca. 1820**

The William Rubin  
Kota, Master Artist,  
Gabon



**1800s**

**ca. 1887**

The first Kota sculptures  
arrive in the collection of  
the Musée du Trocadéro



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**1907**

Picasso visits the Trocadéro:  
The Genesis of Cubism



Top (*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*)  
© The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/  
Art Resource, NY/ © Succession Picasso 2015

Picasso in his studio in the Bateau-  
Lavoir, Paris. Photographed for  
Gelett Burgess, 1908



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**1900s**

**ca. 1915–1929**

Georges de Miré, artist,  
acquires the Rubin Kota



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Image source: Art Resource, NY

**1920s**

**1920s**

Kota reliquary figures at  
the heart of the Modernist  
dialogue



Fernand Léger, *La Création du monde*, 1923  
© ADAGP, Paris 2015

Giacometti with his Kota



© Succession Giacometti/ADAGP,  
Paris 2015

**1920s–1930s**

**1931**

Helena Rubinstein acquires  
the Kota at the auction of  
de Miré's art in Paris



© ADAGP, Paris 2015  
© Successió Miró / ADAGP,  
Paris, 2015



Kota on the mantelpiece in  
the Rubinstein home  
© Condé Nast Archive

**1934**

Rubinstein's famous Bangwa  
Queen by Man Ray



© Man Ray Trust/ ADAGP, Paris 2015

**1952**

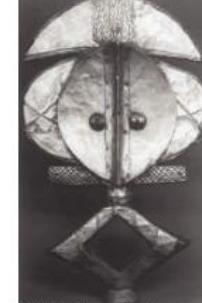


© 1952 Pantheon Books

**1950s–1960s**

**1935**

Landmark exhibition of  
African art at the Museum  
of Modern Art, New York



© Walker Evans Archive,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

**1960**

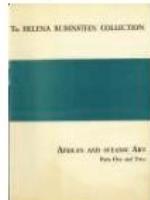
Air France advertisement  
poster



Nathan Jacques Garamond, dit,  
Affiche Air France © ADAGP, Paris 2015

**■ 1966**

Parke Bernet Galleries, The Helena Rubinstein Collection, New York  
1966, Lot 192



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David and Carmen Kreeger acquire the Kota from the auction of Rubinstein's collection (Parke-Bernet, New York, 1966) to be incorporated into their important modern collection



Kota is part of the modern art collection in their Philip Johnson home



Carmen Kreeger (center) and the Kota (far right) at the Kreegers' home, 1969  
Courtesy, The Kreeger Museum, Washington D.C. (also above)

**■ 1981**

William Rubin acquires Kota from the Kreegers



© Sharon Macintosh, 1980

**■ 1984**

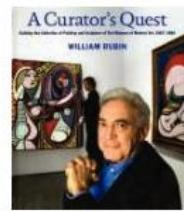
The Rubin Kota at the Museum of Modern Art for the second time in the century—included in William Rubin's landmark exhibition, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern



© The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY (also above)

**■ 2013**

Rubin's story of curatorial excellence and his building of the Modern's unparalleled collection is published



© 2011 Overlook Press

**■ 2014**

Image provided by the Jewish Museum, New York

**1970s-1980s****■ 1967**

William Rubin in his loft in 1967, the year he joined the Museum of Modern Art as a curator



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William Rubin's collection, with Frank Stella and other art luminaries  
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© The Estate of David Smith / ADAGP, Paris 2015  
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**■ 1971**

Pablo Picasso and William Rubin with *Guitar* at the artist's home, Notre-Dame-de-Vie, in Mougins, on 15 February 1971—the day Picasso gave his sculpture to The Museum of Modern Art



Photograph: © Jacqueline Picasso, courtesy Phyllis Hattis. © Succession Picasso 2015.  
Image: The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Scala, Florence

**2000s****■ 2003**

Suzanne Slesin publishes *Over the Top*, a tribute to the great tastemaker, Helena Rubinstein. Illustrates the Kota's glamorous life in the 1930s in Rubinstein's Modernist apartments



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# ART D'AFRIQUE, D'Océanie ET D'AMÉRIQUE DU NORD

## PARIS

### AUCTION

Tuesday, 23 June 2015 at 4.00 pm (16h)

### VIEWING

Thursday, 18 June	10.00 am–6.00 pm
Friday, 19 June	10.00 am–6.00 pm
Saturday, 20 June	10.00 am–6.00 pm
Monday, 22 June	10.00 am–6.00 pm
Tuesday, 23 June	10.00 am–4.00 pm

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Nathan (Jacques Garamond, dit), Affiche Air France © ADAGP, Paris 2015

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- \_\_\_\_\_, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1961
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1968
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Frank Stella*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1970
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Three Generations of Twentieth Century Art: The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1972
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1972
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- \_\_\_\_\_, *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1980
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- \_\_\_\_\_, *"Primitivism" in 20th century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1984
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Henri Rousseau*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1985
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- \_\_\_\_\_, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1989
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- \_\_\_\_\_, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon: Studies in Modern Art #3*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1994
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, 1996
- Page 75, Walker Evans' photograph of the William Rubin Kota, taken for the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition, African Negro Art

## NOTES

- \*. This is an abridged version of Rubin's Introduction to 'Primitivism'.
- 1. During the past twenty years, the word "tribal" has been frequently used in preference to "primitive" in characterizing a wide variety of arts of more or less noncentralized societies with simple technologies. Both words are profoundly problematic; we use them reluctantly (and interchangeably) in this book to answer the need for a generalizing collective term for the art we are addressing. No adequate or generally agreed-upon substitutes for "tribal" and "primitive" have been proposed. Among some specialists, "tribal" has been used in preference to "primitive" because the latter is felt to contain the many negative Darwinian connotations (see discussion pp. 5-6). Others prefer "primitive" to "tribal" because many of the cultures commonly referred to as tribal (in Africa especially) are not tribal in the ethnological sense of the term. Our use of "tribal" is obviously not anthropological in spirit. It corresponds roughly to Webster's (New International Dictionary, 2d ed.) third definition of "tribe"—as the word is used "more loosely": "Any aggregation of peoples, especially in a primitive or nomadic state, believed to be of common stock and acting under a more or less central authority, like that of a headman or chief." The word "tribal" should thus be understood as simply a conventional counter. The Africanist Leon Siroto observes:
- "Tribal in this connection would have to be no more than an arbitrary convention chosen to avoid the pitfalls of the term "primitive" as an expedient minimal designation in general discourse. It has been used so long and so widely that it seems to have gained significant acceptance."
- Caution is indicated: many, if not most, of the peoples intended by the term do not form tribes in the stricter sense of the concept. They may speak the same languages and observe more or less the same customs, but they are not politically coordinated and have no pragmatic recognition or corporate identity. Moreover, a number of them, for these reasons, have disparate iconographies and practice markedly conservative styles, tendencies that should caution against the notion that their art is tribal (i.e. ethnically unitary and distinctive)...Anthropologists tend to agree that tribal groups are more of a European creation than a fact of life. (Letter to W.R. of November 1983)
- Until the late 1960s, "tribal" was still widely used by anthropologists to fill the need for a general term cutting across cultures and continents. Hence, for example, the collection of essays edited by Daniel Biebuyck for the University of California Press in 1969 was called *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*. Today it might be titled differently; but the problem of nomenclature has not been solved. William Fagg has been the most eloquent proponent of the concept of "tribality in African Art." This art, he insists, "is a product and a function of the tribal system," though he observes that "tribal is not a static concept, but a dynamic one" and that "tribal styles are subject to constant change" ("The African Artist" in Biebuyck, ed., p.45).
- African scholars (among others) have criticized "tribal" as "Eurocentric" (Ekpo Eyo, cited in the New York Times, October 12, 1980, p. 70), and their point is well taken, although the anathema cast on the word in Africa (it has literally been banned by one African parliament) probably responds in part to the political problem of melding unified nations and a national consciousness from ethnically diverse populations. That the "Eurocentrism" in question still exists—despite efforts to overcome it—is hardly surprising considering that the disciplines of art history and anthropology are themselves European inventions.
- When addressing individual cultures, art historians can easily avoid such problematic terms as "tribal." But the need for a general term arises from the wish to allude to characteristics that appear (to some Western eyes, at least) similar in a variety of cultures in different parts of the world. The most up-to-date histories of world art still employ, if somewhat gingerly, the words "tribal" and "primitive" (e.g. Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982], p. 547). Some anthropologists would argue that any perceived common characteristics implied in such use of the word "tribal" are fictitious—which explains why the word has largely disappeared from anthropological literature. Even if true, however, this does not mean that it is inappropriate to the study of modernist primitivism. On the contrary, precisely because we are not directly addressing the cultures in question, but investigating the ideas formed of them in the West over the last hundred years, the use of the word "tribal"—which is a function of such ideas and the context in which they were formed—is not misleading. The world's ethnocentric drawbacks become, in effect, illuminating, for they characterize the nature of the primitive perspective.
- 4. See below, pp. 260-65
- 5. Symptomatic of this is the tendency of one of the leading authors on African art to characterize masks as "cubist" simply because they have rectilinear geometrical structures.
- 6. Anthropologists, especially those who consider the characterization of tribal objects as art irrelevant to their concerns, often write as if only the scientifically verifiable and verbalizable anthropological constituents of these objects have meaning. Art historians' interests naturally include the aesthetic and expressive potential of many of these objects. In general, artists usually consider only the direct apprehension of the latter as truly meaningful. This is exemplified in the remark made to me by Picasso to this effect: "Everything I need to know about Africa is in those objects."
- 7. *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, 7 vols, and 1 suppl. (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1897-1904), vol. 7, p. 32
- 8. Webster's New International Dictionary, 2d ed, s.v. "primitivism."
- 9. Ekpo Eyo (*Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art* [Lagos, 1977], p. 28) wrongly uses the word "primitivism" simply to characterize Europeans' use of the word "primitive" in relation to non-Western art. In regard to the same use, he stated (as quoted in the New York Times) that Western scholars "invented the notion of primitivism [sic] and spread it to wherever their influence reached."
- 10. This does not mean that they did not collect such art as "curiosities"; see below, pp. 11-12
- Beyond Gauguin's limited interest in Polynesian art (see below, note 30), he may also have owned two small African figures (see pp. 207-08, note 49).
- 11. This took place in the years preceding World War I.
- The usual translation of "art nègre" as "Negro art," loses something of the pejorative flavor of the French "nègre" (as in "travail de nègre," for example). This connotation notwithstanding, many cultivated French still use the term "art nègre" although they might eschew the word "nègre" in other contexts.
- 12. It should be kept in mind that early in the century the term "art nègre" universally evoked the tribal art of Oceania as well as Africa. The same was true of the word "Negerkunst" and its variants. Both editions (1915 and 1920) of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* contain some examples of Oceanic art. The designation "art nègre" was used for the court art of the kingdom of Benin as well as for the tribal styles.
- 13. In the period between the two World Wars, and for some time afterward, "primitive" was used in the titles of books and university courses and for classification in fine-arts museums (the forerunner of the Michael C. Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum was known as the Museum of Primitive Art, and the relevant department of the Metropolitan is still called the Department of Primitive Art). Until fairly recently the word was widely if sometimes reluctantly used by anthropologists as well (see citation from Lévi-Strauss, pp. 5-6). A collection of anthro-

pological essays published by Oxford University Press in 1973 (Anthony Forge, ed.) was titled *Primitive Art and Society*.

14. Pre-Columbian civilization was (and still is) popularly identified by artists and others primarily with art from large-scale, complex, later-period theocratic societies of the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec in Mesoamerica and the Inca in Peru. These societies were characterized by a high degree of both specialization and social, economic, and political hierarchization, which are reflected in their monumental architecture and sculpture, which I would classify as more Archaic than Primitive in nature. Less known, but certainly not unknown to some artists, were many simpler pre-Columbian socio-cultural entities that did not have state-level government, monumental public works, written languages (which were, in any case, confined to the Maya), and other features of more complex societies. Notable among these were the Chrotega, Chiriquí, Chibcha, and many other chiefdoms that occupied the area between Mesoamerica and the northern Andes.

If, in terms of their art, the Maya, Toltec, Aztec, and Inca should be grouped with such cultures as the Cambodian or Egyptian, they present an exception insofar as the social and religious fabric of all the pre-Columbian cultures was marked by certain characteristics otherwise generally associated with Primitive rather than court cultures. Since, however, modern artists knew little or nothing of this, and approached pre-Columbian cultures entirely through works of art (or their reproductions), these works entered modernism in the late nineteenth century not in the company of the tribal arts of Africa and Oceania (which were overlooked by artists at that time) but as Archaic arts, like those of the other court cultures such as the Egyptian that had passed for "primitive" to Gauguin and van Gogh. The "primitive" aspect of pre-Columbian technology, sociology, and communications account for the cultures' still being sometimes classified as Primitive in terms of their art (which, at the Metropolitan Museum and most others, is in the same department as African and Oceanic art).

Monumental Mesoamerican architecture and sculpture were visible in museums and world's fairs (the 1889 Paris exposition Universelle had a reconstruction of an "Aztec House") and were of interest to artists generations before "art nègre" was known. Museum collections also contained certain centralized pre-Columbian regions, which art had somewhat more in common with tribal art. Yet how much of the latter was seen by artists, at least before the 1920s and 1930s, is open to question.

Pre-Columbian art unquestionably had an influence on modern art, but most of that influence was from the Archaic sculpture of the Aztec, Maya, Toltec, and Olmec cultures. After Gauguin and van Gogh, interest in it is largely associated with the generation of the 1930s (although, on a conceptual more than aesthetic level, pre-Columbian civilizations have been of interest to recent artists). The measure of how deep or wide-spread this influence was will require a study that can satisfactorily distinguish demonstrable influences from simple affinities. Barbara Braun, with whom I have consulted in the organization of "Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art, is presently at work on a book about pre-Columbian sources of modern art.

In addition to pre-Columbian objects, most natural history museums also possessed some specimens of the tribal arts of Mesoamerica and South America. Examples of these more recent objects are the Mundurucú trophy head that Nolde included in his painting Masks (pp. 378-79) and the Witoto masks illustrated on page 636.

15. Picasso seems to have conflicting emotions about what he called "l'art aztèque," by which he meant the whole of pre-Columbian art as he knew it. My notes of conversations with him contain a reference to this art which I set down from memory as "boring, inflexible, too big ... figures without invention." However, he praised the beauty of an "Aztec head" in a conversation with Brassai (Picasso and Company, trans. Francis Price from the French *Conversations avec Picasso* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966], p. 242). As recorded by Brassai (for May 19, 1960), Picasso and he were looking at an album of his photographs. The chapter in the album entitled "Primitive Images," "an Aztec head," Brassai tells us, "makes Picasso pause abruptly, and then cries: 'That is as rich as the facade of a cathedral.'"

Picasso's feelings for the inventiveness of tribal art was a response to a reality—African and Oceanic art is more variegated and inventive than pre-Columbian art—as is evident if one compares visits to Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología and the Oceanic wing of Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde, the two most beautiful and elaborate presentation of these respective arts that I know. But Picasso's attitude was also partly a matter of his perspective; hence my phrase "perceived inventiveness." What Picasso saw in the Trocadéro and the curio shops at the art of "les nègres" was thought of by him as issuing, broadly speaking, from a single cultural entity, Africa, when in fact the variety of African styles is in part a function of the immense number of ethnic groups of different religions, languages, and traditions covering an area far more vast than Western Europe.

16. Note that I differentiate here between the Old Kingdom, on the one hand, and the Middle Kingdom and New Empire, on the other. Old Kingdom art strikes me as very rich in invention. Such "academicism" (as oppose to simple "Traditionalism") as one finds in Egyptian art becomes a factor only after the period. Invention, however, is a quantitative aspect of a work of art and has no necessary relation to quality. To find more invention in the work of Old Kingdom artists than subsequent ones is not to deny the quality of the many masterpieces that come down to us from the Middle Kingdom and New Empire.

17. "Classification stylistique du masque dan et guéré de la Côte d'Ivoire Occidentale (A.O.F.)" Medelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, no. 4 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1948). This impressive study, though published in 1948, was based upon research done prior to World War II.

18. Goldwater (Primitivism in Modern Art, as in note 2, p. 150) quite rightly used "Archaic" to characterize the Iberian sculpture that interested Picasso and that subsequently "leads into the 'Negro' paintings." Picasso's interest in that sculpture was continuous with his even earlier interest in Egyptian art. The latter shares sufficient common denominators with certain non-Western court arts—at least as perceived by artists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries—to warrant a global term; "Archaic," I believe, serves this purpose better than does any other adjective.

19. In the 1897-1904 *Nouveau Larousse illustré* (in which the word "primitivism" made its first appearance, see p.2 and note 7), "primitive" was given (as both adjective and noun) sixteen different definitions, ranging from the algebraic and geological to the historical and ecclesiastical (pp. 31-32). Two of the sixteen were pejorative in connotation, notably the one marked "ethnological"; "Les peuples qui sont encore au degré le moins avancé de civilisation." The fine-arts definition, given as a noun, was simply: "Artistes, peintres ou sculpteurs qui ont précédé les maîtres de la grande époque."

20. In conversation with Sabartés in his studio at villa Les Voiliers, Royan, 1940. (See Jamie Sabartés, Picasso, An Intimate Portrait, trans. Angel Flores from the Spanish Picasso, Retratos y Recuerdos [New York, 1949], p. 213).

21. "Gothic" was traditionally paired with "barbaric" in the classicist critique of Western art. Only in the nineteenth century did the word begin to attain respectability. The speed at which pejorative connotations can drop away from art-historical terms may be measured by the rapidity with which the designation "Impressionist" was accepted by the public and even the painters themselves, despite the fact, as Meyer Schapiro has observed, that it had pejorative connotations relating to artisanal house decoration ("peinture d'impression").

22. Robert Goldwater, "Judgments of Primitive Art, 1905-1965," in Tradition and Creativity in

Tribal Art, ed. Biebuyck, p. 25.

23. Such candidates as "ethnic" and "indigenous" have been found to have so many art-historical and/or sociological drawbacks that no serious attempt has been made to substitute them for "primitive."

24. "The Dilemma Which Faces African Art," The Listener, September 13, 1951, pp. 413-15.

25. This is particularly true of African scholars, for the political reasons referred to in note 1.

26. Structural Anthropology, trans. C. Jacobsen and B.G. Schoepf (London, 1963), pp. 101-02

27. Cf. below, Varnedoe, pp. 180-81

28. "Simplicity" was an idea to which Picasso returned frequently in my discussions with him, sometimes in terms of his own work or (more often) that of other modern artists (e.g., Matisse) and on two occasions in connection with "art nègre." It was clear that what he meant by this was not just the absence of elaborate effects but an economy that implied the distillation of complexities. "Simplicity" was generally used in his conversation as an antonym for the type of complexity characteristic of nineteenth-century salon illusionism. Picasso's overall criticism of the received art of his youth was that artists had forgotten how to be simple. With Sabartés, as with me, he lauded Primitive artists for their simplicity (See Sabartés, Picasso, An Intimate Portrait, e.g., note 20, p. 213).

29. The Michael C. Rockefeller wing of the Metropolitan Museum is the classic instance of this. It depended directly upon Nelson Rockefeller's passion for tribal art, which had led to his earlier founding of the Museum of Primitive Art. This in turn depended on and followed from his taste for and involvement with twentieth-century art and his knowledge of the importance of tribal art for many modern artists.

31. Flam (p. 218) is in agreement with me on this. While there were no objects in the then Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro that might have inspired Crouching Man, there were a number of pre-Columbian sculptures that Derain could have seen on his 1906 visit to the British Museum which have affinities with his piece.

32. For the influence of Portuguese Christina incursions on Congolese art, see Paul S. Wingert, The Sculpture of Negro Africa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 54, and William Fagg and Eliot Elisofon, The Sculpture of Africa (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), p. 157.

33. I cite Malraux here (*La Tête d'obsidienne* [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], p. 17), although Picasso also made this point to me, and doubtless to others. His meaning, at least in conversation with me, was not identical to what Malraux apprehended from this remark (see pp. 296, and 339 note 142).

34. I am speaking here, of course, of influences of non-Western pre-Renaissance art. Despite its radical reaction against Renaissance-derived illusionism, modern painting is finally more informed by aspects of that art than by any other tradition. No matter how much a modern work may share with Egyptian, Romanesque, or Byzantine painting or with Primitive sculpture, the crucial difference between them is that the language that the modern style alters and simplifies is Western illusionism. The older styles are necessarily seen from the perspective formed by that intervening tradition.

35. Emile Bernard, Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne (Paris, 1925), p. 31.



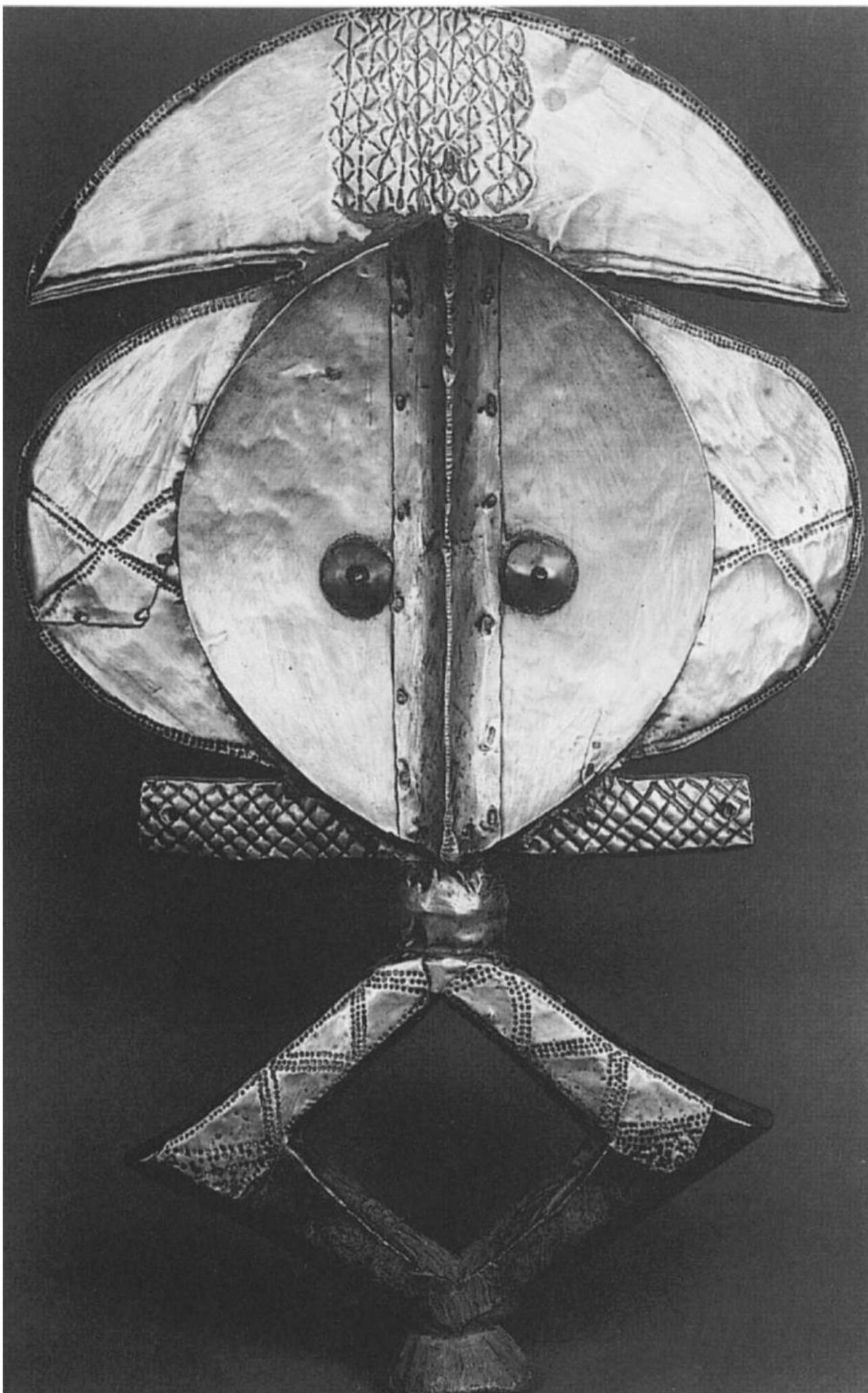
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This decorated vase from ancient Greece, called the 'Kleopatra Vase', was found in Egypt. It shows a scene of a bull being sacrificed to the Egyptian god Amun. The bull is being led by a priest who is carrying a long staff. The bull is being led by a priest who is carrying a long staff. The bull is being led by a priest who is carrying a long staff.



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